

Gosling & Taylor, The Greeks on Pleasure.

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This is a continuation of notes on Gosling and Taylor's The Greeks on Pleasure, begun here: <https://www.epicureanfriends.com/index.php?thread/1602-gosling-taylor-the-greeks-on-pleasure-notes-up-to-but-not-including-epicurus/>

For the most part these are quotes and/or paraphrases from the book; my comments are italicized and in parentheses. Text in bold is my emphasis. The authors of the book are not Epicureans, theirs is an academic take on Epicurean pleasure, worthy of discussion. There is much more to their discussion of Epicurus than I've been able to include here, but I think I've covered their main points.

Chapter 18: Epicurus

18.1.4 According to Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus used an argument similar to Eudoxus that all living things are pleased with pleasure and are by nature, without recourse to reasoning, hostile to pain, and so we automatically flee the latter.

18.1.4 Epicurus seems to insist on the fact that the recognition of the value of pleasure is pre-rational. This suggests that he insists on the relation of pleasure to perception. In other words, the experience of pleasure is the experience of its goodness. For consistency with his theory of knowledge he must be able to give a perceptual basis for judgments of value if he is to claim that they can be known.

18.1.4 This is sometimes construed as though pleasure was a feeling attached to a perception. But *pathos*, Epicurus' word for pleasure and pain, means a way of being affected; there are two *pathe* that occur with every living thing: pleasure and pain.

18.1.4 There is no midway between pleasure and pain: pleasure is defined as the absence of pain. Not, of course, that any absence of pain (e.g. death) is pleasure, but any painless conscious life is a pleasure. This does not consist simply in being alive, but in living the kind of life characteristic of the species.

18.1.4 Every perception involves either pleasure or pain, and in such perception a sentient being grasps the value or disvalue of being so affected, a grasp that is, at a pre-logical level, constituted by acceptance or aversion. **The bias of this way of thinking will be to make the goodness of each particular pleasure obvious in each perception. There will be no temptation to make the value of pleasure maximization over a life obvious to perception.**

18.1.4 **Anyone who makes a judgment of the worth of a life can only do so by reference to its pleasantness, which can only be judged by the perception of those who live it. There is room for argument as to what form of life is pleasantest, but no room at all for discussion as to what makes something good.**

18.1.5 Per Epicurus, kinetic pleasures are those which accompany a change from pain to its removal. Static pleasures are those of conditions where pain is absent, and with it any cause of change. Quite generally, pleasures cannot increase in degree beyond the point of removal of pain, only in type.

18.1.5 With bodily pleasures this limit is reached when the need that is causing pain is removed. Mental pain is largely caused by such things as grief and fear and so is only to be removed by reflections on the source of these emotions. See [PD18](#). **Since there is only variation after the point of removal of pain, not increase, there is no need to discuss comparative intensities or measures of comparative pleasantness of different activities.**

18.1.6 Therefore **the problem is to determine if a life of pleasure can be attained and if so, how.** At the bodily level Epicurus held that severe pain is short lived, and long lasting pain generally allows for an excess of pleasure over pain (PD4), so that properly viewed unavoidable pains of illness should not be given much weight. Meeting other bodily needs is a fairly easy matter ([PD15](#), 21).

18.1.6 At the mental level, things are more complicated. Painful emotions are aroused by fear of future evil (pain=evil). These are to a large extent based on false views, either on the nature of man and the universe or on the nature of pleasure.

18.1.6 A simple life removed from public affairs and bolstered by reflection on the basic facts about the structure of the universe can be relied upon to produce a stable happiness. (???)

18.2.2 Problem: this would suggest that Epicurus attaches no significance to sensual pleasures, which contradicts some of his recorded statements.

18.2.5 Problem: judging pleasures and pains by their effects (as in the letter to Menoeceus) implies that duration is an important factor.

18.3.1 Discussion of VS33 *the voice of the flesh is not to hunger, not to thirst, not to feel cold* as it relates to his statement that no good is conceivable without the pleasures of taste, love, hearing and sight. The latter does not say that these pleasures are either greater or more important than any others, only that Epicurus cannot conceive of the good if these pleasures are removed. It doesn't imply that no others are necessary, or any ranking of pleasures. Pleasures of sight and hearing may be generally unmixed, but the unmixed pleasures of taste and sex are only possible with removal of distress. To Epicurus there are only two *pathe*, pleasure and pain, so to avoid these pleasures (a) in the unmixed case is avoiding an obvious good, and (b) in the other cases is avoiding painless perception which is genuine pleasure, as well as the pleasure of replenishment.

18.3.2 Regarding the comment that all pleasure begins in the stomach, it is the common view of sages that a well-regulated diet is the foundation of a well-regulated life.

18.3.3 Epicurus thought that bodily pleasure (painless sensory pleasure) had a certain primacy and that *ataraxia* is confident expectation and memory of bodily pleasure. So well-based mental pleasure is dependent on bodily pleasure. However this does not make bodily pleasure greater. Further, since anxiety can ruin bodily pleasure, and since *ataraxia* requires bodily pleasure as a general rule, there is a sense in which *ataraxia* constitutes the highest condition of pleasure and is thereby more important.

18.3.4 This is not a proof that this was Epicurus' thinking, but an interpretation which defends against interpretations of inconsistency and therefore a preferred interpretation.

18.3.5-18.3.8 *(This is an extended 3 page discussion of Epicurus vs Aristippus and the Cyrenaics. [Cassius](#) , based on previous posts this might be worth a separate post with a reproduction of the text. For now, I'm skipping to the end of the discussion.)* Duration: the view that a long period of pleasure is better than a short one, and worse for pain, is the most natural and plausible way to understand the calculation of pleasure and seems to be suggested by PD4. But [PD19](#) and [PD20](#) state that an extension of a period of pleasure will not increase it, that it is the body that wants infinite pleasure but the mind knows better. This seems to imply that a wise man will not take the duration of pleasure into account.

18.3.9-18.3.14 *(The discussion of duration now runs for 3 pages; I'm noting the end of the discussion.)* Comparing two pleasures, or two periods of pleasure, is possible only if one is mixed, in which case the unmixed one is pleasanter than the mixed one. Comparison of two unmixed pleasures is only possible if one or both periods of pleasure can be extended to a point where it becomes mixed. But this is to look on lives from the outside. In actual practice, surely the wise man will always be concerned with increasing the proportion of pleasure in his life and reducing the amount of unavoidable pain. It is only in fanciful utopian conditions that he will not be concerned with duration.

18.3.15 **We are so used to the problems of utilitarianism that we are inclined to assume that anything that sounds like a hedonic calculus is meant for day to day use. But this does not seem to be true with Epicurus.** He is not telling us that a wise man must perform daily intricate calculations of the sort *perhaps* envisaged in Plato's Protagoras.

18.3.15 **A wise man needs to know certain basic facts about man and nature, convince himself of them and acquire certain habits of life. These will ensure that pleasure predominates. No daily hedonic calculus is necessary; the calculation is all at the stage of working out the facts, the effects of belief in them, and the proper regimen. From time to time one will have to review one's knowledge and confirm one's attitudes and practices. Once one is convinced of the truth of Epicurus' doctrines and has incorporated his teachings into one's life, one ceases to worry and lives a life as near to *ataraxia* and *aponia* as is possible for one. To achieve the best life possible, conviction and good habits are enough. One's wisdom shows in the**

acquisition and development of those characteristics that will keep his life as pleasant as it can be, and that being so he will not be deluded into thinking that it will improve if only it lasts a little longer.

18.3.17 Living a life free of disturbance is not just a matter of staying alive and not being disturbed, as with a person under heavy sedation, but living the sort of life specific to the being in question. This is vaguely Aristotelean: if one is living according to one's nature then one is enjoying one's life, and failure of enjoyment is a function of disrupted nature. Epicurus is less interested in individual activities and their enjoyment, and more in a condition of the individual which ensures him balance independently of external circumstance.

18.3.19 *Ataraxia* consists in a condition of correct belief, and *aponia* in a condition free of bodily lack. Epicurean wisdom, *phronesis*, is more like Aristotelean practical wisdom than Plato's wisdom. The distinction between wisdom and *ataraxia* is therefore verbal rather than real. Since absence of wisdom is equivalent to the absence of *ataraxia* and therefore of mental pleasure, and its presence to the presence of mental pleasure, using it or mental pleasure as a criterion of worth amount to the same thing.

18.3.20 Normal life is pleasant unless one's constitution is disturbed; one's whole tendency is against disturbance; since pleasure is only reduced by disturbance this means that the organism appreciates as good/best the pleasant/most pleasant, whose worth is recognized in perception. Once one recognizes the nature of the good as given in perception one can see that many beings actually pursue illusory goods. The wise man recognizes that a relatively unmixed life is attainable, and to a large extent achieves it in that recognition; he thereby acquires an indifference to either death or the extension of life and a contentment with what he has.

*(The next, and final, thread will cover *katastematic* and *kinetic* pleasures and the final chapters of the book.)*