

Commentary by Elayne On "Ideal Epicurean Jobs"

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2020 at 6:59 AM

[[Crosspost from FB](#)] One of our members, [DC](#), has submitted an interesting question for learning: "What are some ideal Epicurean jobs? What can an average person do to lead an Epicurean lifestyle of moderate work and more time for pleasure?"

First, instead of an "ideal" job, because we hold no beliefs in abstract ideals and our goal is pleasure, I will reframe the question as "what are some jobs that could help me have a pleasurable life?"

When I see that question, it reminds me to back up even a little more and ask "how can I spend my time to have a pleasurable life?" Not everyone will decide that having a paid job is the most pleasure-producing use of their time. Some may have financial resources such that they don't need a job but may want one anyway-- others may decide not to work for pay.

If we've decided a job is necessary for pleasure, then we can think about our personal preferences and interests, our resources for obtaining any necessary training, and whether there are pains associated with jobs we are considering. Not thinking abstractly, we will want to know what opportunities are available in the places we'd want to live, and who our coworkers might be. How might the job differ from one city or country to another? How would factors like unions and other legal structures affect us? Do we like being employees, employers, working in groups, or alone? We would take a detailed view.

In some cases, the job itself can add to our pleasure-- not just the income it produces. This makes the choice of jobs an extremely individual one.

In other cases, we may find options are more limited or decide that available jobs are more pain than pleasurable, and in that case we might decide to pick one that maximized income or free time, depending on which choice suited our personal pleasure needs the best. If we live in a place where there is a lot of free or low cost pleasure, maybe outdoor activities or free concerts or museums and libraries, maybe we will work only as much as needed for food and shelter. It just depends.

As far as "average" person goes, that is an abstract way to think, not Epicurean. It doesn't matter what an imaginary average person wants to do-- it matters what you enjoy and want to do. We don't all have the same pleasures.

"Moderate" work-- our philosophy is not about moderation but maximizing pleasure. Moderate is an abstract idea, and what one person calls moderate will be extreme for another. And a person might not enjoy "moderate" work-- some prefer strenuous work or longer hours (especially if the work itself is pleasurable), and others would like to work as little as possible so

they can do other things. So I wouldn't worry about the concept of moderation. It makes decisions unnecessarily complicated.

"More time for pleasure"-- what we are really after is the maximum pleasure, not more time. We each have the same number of hours in a day and make decisions how to spend those hours in such a way as to enjoy life the most. It will be a very personal, subjective process, and it is definitely worth the time to think about.

A short version of my own job history-- I wanted to be a physician from childhood. I got pleasure in the science and the learning process, so I successfully completed both an MD and a PhD. Part of the reason I got the PhD, though it took longer, was that by doing so I had my tuition waived with a scholarship and got a stipend. Parts of the training were painful. Back then, 120 hr work weeks were the usual-- but for me this was outweighed by pleasure at learning, the work itself, and the future pleasure I was building for myself.

After training, I have had different employed positions which I chose (or left) for specific work environment reasons. Right now, I have a job at a nonprofit clinic which I enjoy very much. The pay is less than at jobs I assess to be more painful than pleasurable-- for example, I do not enjoy a rushed schedule. I'm maximizing pleasure, according to my own preferences.

If you are a person who is squeamish about blood, needles, etc, or maybe just don't like talking to patients or something else about medical work-- it would be a mistake to copy my job choice! In that case, those long hours of training would just lead to misery.

DC:

Interesting. I guess as the old saying goes - work that you enjoy isn't work. A lot of my friends, including me, do not enjoy their work, but feel unable to move to a different more enjoyable job or career path due not having the resources to retrain or just because there are limited employment options in COVID right now. They often have more options than most of them give themselves credit for, but they seem unwilling to put the work in and take the risk to change to a career that would be more fulfilling. I guess they should apply the hedonic calculus more and see that the trade off of hard work and late nights now, will likely result in happiness payoffs later.

Elayne:

There are times when options are more limited. Occasionally I've stayed in jobs that had become painful until I could figure out an alternative. Even working a 3 month notice can be a big pain, lol. During those times I looked for as many ways as I could to make my time more pleasurable, and some of my decisions were mental actions. For instance, the mental action of taking time to enjoy knowing I was helping my patients-- smiling at them-- taking time to recall pleasant memories. Sometimes a small thing like just slightly slowing down helped, and I

confess I enjoyed the minor subversiveness of resisting a rushed pace.

AT:

Why is 'not thinking abstractly' an Epicurean quality?

I enjoy planning my life to maximise pleasure.

This involves a great deal of abstract thinking.

'I enjoy doing this, I don't enjoy doing that, therefore I will organise myself to do more of this and less of that.' (And if I discover that the results are disappointing, I will change my plan).

All this strikes me as a great deal of abstract thinking and I'm concerned that this is described as 'not Epicurean'.

Martin:

A degree in science offers many opportunities where pleasure is associated with a large part of the work, and then it does not matter that the effort on the job is much more than moderate in early stages of the career.

In my case, I liked physics the most, chemistry a close second. So I did a master-equivalent degree in physics and a Ph.D. in physical chemistry. The effort for both was much more than moderate but mostly pleasurable because I liked learning.

After many years of mostly hard and mostly pleasurable work, I started to get increasingly exhausted from even a reduced schedule of just 8 hours of work such that I had no more energy to pursue demanding hobbies which before had given me a lot of pleasure in addition to that from work. In response, I took time-outs from work. Hedonic calculus applied to potential major expenses had resulted in me never buying a car or other luxury items which I did not really need (fridge, TV, ...). Therefore, I can afford to travel and to take unpaid leave every year for these time-outs, which I spend mostly on hobbies and meeting friends.

Another example: A close relative without degree (divorced mother of one kid) appeared stuck in a low paid part time job at poverty level. She went through the effort to make a social science degree at a tele university in a subject fitting her employer's scope, subsequently got an adequate full-time job and is happy with it.

Cassius to A.T.:

Elayne can of course best answer this herself, but the point I believe she is stressing is that in Epicurean philosophy motivations are ultimately traced to real things - the reality of the pleasure or pain that our choices bring to us - and not to abstract goals that some people (other

philosophies) represent to be independent of and even superior to pleasure and pain (i.e. - "virtue").

The philosophical problem I believe Elayne is referencing is not that she has a problem with "one plus one equals two," but that philosophical devotion to abstractions, rather than (as Epicurus taught) to things that are ultimately real, leads to Platonism, Platonism's stoic varieties, and all sorts of other categories of problems.

Even to say "I am devoted to pleasure" can be considered to be abstract thinking, and to be productive it is necessary to trace that back and identify pleasure as a feeling, something that is real to you, and not just as a word floating in the air or in your brain.