

A Discussion On Pleasure and the Zero State

When Only The Best Is Good Enough, You Must Look For A Goal That Has A Limit
 (A Peak, A Highest Point, Something Than Which Nothing Is Better)

<p>Therefore the power and the greatness of virtue cannot rise to greater heights, because increase is denied to that which is superlatively great. ... The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Seneca <i>To Lucilius</i></p>	<p>Q: Have pleasure and pain a limit, or are they among the things which admit of more or less?</p> <p>A. Yes, they are among those which admit of the more....</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Plato <i>Philebus</i></p>	<p>The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Epicurus <i>Principal Doctrine 3</i></p>	<p>And he used to say that those philosophers were right when they said that ... nothing is better than a life of ease, full of, and loaded with, all sorts of pleasures.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cicero <i>Describing A Follower of Epicurus</i></p>
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Gaius

Florius Lupus asked in a related thread: "The idea that there is no positive pleasure beyond the avoidance of pain always was what bothered me most about Epicurus' ethics, because it would lead to apathy. Do you have a quote where he specifies the kind of pleasure beyond absence of pain we should seek to attain? I only know quotes where he warns us of "unnatural desires"

Because this issue is so important I wanted to respond in a separate thread. Another way of asking the question is: "What references does anyone have to offset what appear to be the clear statements in the Letter to Menoeceus, in PD3: "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful," and in [PD18](#): "Once the pain arising from need is removed, physical pleasure is not increased and only varies in another direction." Why does this not add up to a call that there is nothing higher than the extinguishment of desire, an ascetic "zero state"?

It is always good to talk about this because it is necessary to piece together other material in order to arrive at a total context that allows all of Epicurus's statements on pleasure to be reconciled. Because the quotes Gaius Lupus asked about do seem to make it appear that Epicurus held "pleasure" to be something different from what normal people think it means. We know in fact that Epicurus defined "gods" as being natural and not supernatural, and he defined "virtue" as being instrumental to pleasure and not as absolute. Was Epicurus using a technical definition of the word "pleasure" to convey to us that he considered "absence of pain" to be a complete and true description of the "pleasure" that he held to be the goal of life?

I have collected all of my research at the link I will provide below, but I can summarize a couple of very important points, especially as this relates to the issue of "katastematic" pleasure,

which is the name most commentators seem to give to believe that Epicurus used to describe this type of "zero state / absence of pain" pleasure.

Of the material directly attributed to Epicurus, we know that Epicurus was emphatic that "pleasure" is a feeling which we experience personally and need use no words to define or to defend. This seems to be a clear statement that pleasure is something all animals, including humans, experience without need for explanation: From On Ends: "...pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature."

As to the highest pleasure we have this recorded in Athenaeus - Deipnosophists XII p. 546E: Not only Aristippus and his followers, but also Epicurus and his welcomed kinetic pleasure; I will mention what follows, to avoid speaking of the "storms" {of passion} and the "delicacies" which Epicurus often cites, and the "stimuli" which he mentions in his On the End-Goal. For he says "For I at least do not even know what I should conceive the good to be, if I eliminate the pleasures of taste, and eliminate the pleasures of sex, and eliminate the pleasures of listening, and eliminate the pleasant motions caused in our vision by a visible form."

We know that Epicurus said this about pleasure as the good: Plutarch, That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible, 7, p. 1091A: Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their "thing delighted" - their good - is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: "That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good."

And we know that Cicero wrote that Epicurus held "joy" to be the greatest good: Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, III.18.41: "Why do we shirk the question, Epicurus, and why do we not confess that we mean by pleasure what you habitually say it is, when you have thrown off all

sense of shame? Are these your words or not? For instance, in that book which embraces all your teaching (for I shall now play the part of translator, so no one may think I am inventing) you say this: "For my part I find no meaning which I can attach to what is termed good, if I take away from it the pleasures obtained by taste, if I take away the pleasures which come from listening to music, if I take away too the charm derived by the eyes from the sight of figures in movement, or other pleasures by any of the senses in the whole man. Nor indeed is it possible to make such a statement as this - that it is joy of the mind which is alone to be reckoned as a good; for I understand by a mind in a state of joy, that it is so, when it has the hope of all the pleasures I have named - that is to say the hope that nature will be free to enjoy them without any blending of pain." And this much he says in the words I have quoted, so that anyone you please may realize what Epicurus understands by pleasure."

Several modern authorities have reached the conclusion that this zero state / absence of pain is not to be construed as some new type of pleasure, different from what we normally understand the word "pleasure" to mean.

Gosling & Taylor, "The Greeks on Pleasure." 1982. See Chapter 19, "Katastematic and Kinetic Pleasures" (Also : "Plato's and Aristotle's intellectual feats can only win one's admiration, but a cool look at the results enables one to understand how Epicurus might have seemed more in contact with the subject. For if we are right, Epicurus was not advocating the pursuit of some passionless state which could only be called one of pleasure in order to defend a paradox. Rather he was advocating a life where pain is excluded and we are left with familiar physical pleasures. The resultant life may be simple, but it is straightforwardly pleasant.")

Boris [Nikolsky](#), "Epicurus on Pleasure." 2001 ("The paper deals with the question of the attribution to Epicurus of the classification of pleasures into 'kinetic' and 'static'. This classification, usually regarded as authentic, confronts us with a number of problems and contradictions. Besides, it is only mentioned in a few sources that are not the most reliable. Following Gosling and Taylor, I believe that the authenticity of the classification may be called in question. The analysis of the ancient evidence concerning Epicurus' concept of pleasure is made according to the following principle: first, I consider the sources that do not mention the distinction between 'kinetic' and 'static' pleasures, and only then do I compare them with the other group of texts which comprises reports by Cicero, Diogenes Laertius and Athenaeus. From the former group of texts there emerges a concept of pleasure as a single and not twofold notion, while such terms as 'motion' and 'state' describe not two different phenomena but only two characteristics of the same phenomenon. On the other hand, the reports comprising the latter group appear to derive from one and the same doxographical tradition, and to be connected with the classification of ethical doctrines put forward by the Middle Academy and known as the *divisio Carneadea*. In conclusion, I argue that the idea of Epicurus' classification of pleasures is based on a misinterpretation of Epicurus' concept in Academic doxography, which tended to contrapose it to doctrines of other schools, above all to the Cyrenaics' views.")

Mathew Wenham On Cicero's Interpretation of Katastematic Pleasure in Epicurus. 2007 "The standard interpretation of the concept of katastematic pleasure in Epicurus has it referring to "static" states from which feeling is absent. We owe the prevalence of this interpretation to Cicero's account of Epicureanism in his De Finibus Bonorum Et Malorum. Cicero's account, in turn, is based on the Platonic theory of pleasure. The standard interpretation, when applied to principles of Epicurean hedonism, leads to fundamental contradictions in his theory. I claim that it is not Epicurus, but the standard interpretation that generates these errors because the latter construes pleasure in Epicurus according to an attitudinal theoretical framework, whilst the account of pleasure that emerges from Epicurean epistemology sees it as experiential."

Norman DeWitt, "Epicurus and His Philosophy." 1954 Chapter 12, the New Hedonism (e.g.: Even at the present day the same objection is raised. For instance, a modern Platonist, ill informed on the true intent of Epicurus, has this to say: "What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by emptying pleasure of all positive content?" This ignores the fact that this was but one of the definitions of pleasure offered by Epicurus, that he recognized kinetic as well as static pleasures. It ignores also the fact that Epicurus took personal pleasure in public festivals and encouraged his disciples to attend them and that regular banquets were a part of the ritual of the sect. Neither does it take account of the fact that in the judgment of Epicurus those who feel the least need of luxury enjoy it most and that intervals of abstinence enhance the enjoyment of luxury. Thus the Platonic objector puts upon himself the necessity of denying that the moderation of the rest of the year furnishes additional zest to the enjoyment of the Christmas dinner; he has failed to become aware of the Epicurean zeal for "condensing pleasure.")

So those cites can be used to show that "pleasure" means the same thing to us as it did to Epicurus. As to why Epicurus was insistent on discussing pleasure as absence of pain, I would contend that that was in response to the reasoning of Plato in [Philebus](#), and others who attacked the feeling of pleasure as something which can never be satisfied, as collected at my link here:

<https://newepicurean.com/foundations-2/...pleasure-model/>

Post by "Cassius" of June 18, 2019 at 6:39 AM

Gaius:

Thank you for the detailed answer. I did not expect the issue to be so complex.

So can we summarize it as "positive pleasure" beyond the zero state of absence of pain is the simple joy of experiencing life? E.g. a dinner with friends, watching a sunset, a pleasant

conversation, celebrating Christmas/Saturnalia etc.?

Since existence requires the fulfillment of simple desires, eating drinking etc., their satisfaction is already pleasureable. So in absence of pain it is a constant feeling of joy just to live. Is this the positive pleasure Epicurus aims for?

If I am not mistaken, the Cyrenaics, the real hedonists, had a different view. They agreed with Epicurus about pleasure being the highest good, but they wanted to maximize any kind of bodily pleasures, and they believed that there was no limit to possible pleasure.

Cassius Amicus:

First addressing Gaius, as I see it this suggestion ("So in absence of pain it is a constant feeling of joy just to live), which I think is fairly common to make as the definition of katastemic pleasure, does not equate with "the positive pleasure Epicurus aims for."

Everyone who reads DL will see clearly stated that - even assuming that Epicurus himself addressed the distinction - Epicurus endorsed BOTH pleasures "of rest" and "of activity."

It would be necessary to repeat the entire chapter of Gosling & Taylor's analysis to explain in full, but their conclusion I think is the correct one: " For if we are right, Epicurus was not advocating the pursuit of some passionless state which could only be called one of pleasure in order to defend a paradox. Rather he was advocating a life where pain is excluded and we are left with familiar physical pleasures. The resultant life may be simple, but it is straightforwardly pleasant."

There is no reason in my mind to exclude from "familiar physical pleasures" the normal definitions of joy and delight as the Epicurean goal. And in fact the quote about the feeling that is experienced at the relief from impending disaster, which almost certainly is intense, leans in that direction.

Rather than the focus on simplicity which does or at least can lead to asceticism, in my view the thrust of Epicurean teaching is contained in the hedonic calculus itself - the goal is pleasure as we normally understand it, to the greatest extent possible within natural bounds as a human, but with every decision in life weighed by the question of whether it will produce greater net happiness or not.

It would not be consistent in an atomistic universe to have a single type of pleasure which is in itself better than all the rest. People have different preferences and find their pleasures in many different activities. What would be consistent across the whole board would be to look at them as being united in being humans of definite, and not unlimited, lifespan.

Looking at total lifespan of the individual as the ultimate measure of life, then at the end of that person's life we can ask "How much mental and bodily pleasure, and how much pain, did that person experience over his lifetime? Given that the goal of life is pleasure, that means that the

answer is formulated as given by Cicero: The most desired life is one which is "crammed full of pleasures" and accompanied by the least pain.

That this is best viewed as the individual feeling of the person in assessing his own experience of pleasure and pain is indicated by the saying in the letter to Menoecus that what we are after is not the longest life, but the happiest. It seems to me that in the most general terms all this adds up to a calculation of net pleasure that does not apply to the moment, but to the lifetime of the individual, the only person whose feeling and judgment matters in assessing his or her life.

Maybe the last point to include is that you are right as far as I can tell that Epicurus held mental pleasures to be as important, and regularly more intense, than "bodily" pleasures, and for that reason his advice as to the calculation including both bodily and mental (clearly stated in On Ends") is more sweeping. But out of respect to the Cyreniacs this distinction seems so obvious that it is difficult to believe that they really held the "bodily pleasures of the moment" position which is attributed to them. They probably had some other position on that in my view, and the comment by DL distinguishing them from Epicurus on this might be an artifact of some other perspective, as [Nikolsky](#) argues about the katastematic issue in his article "Epicurus on Pleasure."

(By the way that article is in the files section here, along with the Wentham article on pleasure being an *experience* and they are both very good articles. The Gosling & Taylor book has the most detailed analysis but that requires a library.)

Post by "Cassius" of June 18, 2019 at 6:48 AM

Theo: "I don't think that life with absence of pain is possible. maybe fleeting pain-less moments. especially since Epicurus includes all kinds of possible pains as to be avoided. the quest for pleasure should be constant. Cyrenaics are not the real but the original hedonists. I like 'em cause they are more into fun."

Cassius Amicus:

As to Theo's "I don't think that life with absence of pain is possible. maybe fleeting pain-less moments. especially since Epicurus includes all kinds of possible pains as to be avoided. the quest for pleasure should be constant."

I agree that the quest for pleasure should be constant, with the realization for us humans (as opposed to [Epicurean gods](#)) that what we can hope to achieve is NET pleasure but not the elimination of all pains.

This comment is another occasion to stress that I feel sure Epicurus would agree. This calls back the central point of the analysis stated above - that the entire "absence of pain" issue is a response to a debating point asserted by Plato - that pain has no limit. "Absence of pain" is the "limit of pleasure" and is thus the logical point which refutes Plato.

Understood as the logical point which refutes Plato, which Epicurean students would have understood given the availability of their teachers and texts, the "absence of pain" argument is critically important in winning the "logic wars" with the anti-Epicureans.

Understood as a full and complete definition of the word "pleasure" or of "the Epicurean goal of life," then "absence of pain" is disastrously incomplete and leads to total reversal of the philosophy.

That problem was the fault of Epicurus or the Epicureans, and despite Cicero's insistence of it being confusing, it probably did not cause unnecessary trouble as the Platonic argument and the Epicurean response survived in tandem for people to understand the issue.

The problem is ours, that our society has been so thoroughly Judeo-Christianized, and so thoroughly Stoicized, that very few people are aware of the details of the original debate and why the issue of "absence of pain" was so important in the ancient Greek Schools.

Again, the best history and analysis of this in detail, by far, is Gosling & Taylors' "The Greeks on Pleasure." Their points gave rise to the [Nikolsky](#) article.

Post by "Cassius" of June 19, 2019 at 8:38 AM

GF: If we understand hunger as a form of pain, then there will necessarily be a state of hunger/pain between two meals. And the regular satisfaction of this need gives pleasure. We can never be constantly satisfied in all our physical needs. We are always oscillating between needs and their satisfaction. The smaller these oscillations are, the closer we are to eudaimonia.

Cassius Amicus: In Gosling & Taylor's "The Greeks on Pleasure" there is a discussion, if I recall, of the pleasures that arise from the fulfilment of bodily needs (such as hunger) with the experience of pleasures that do not arise from bodily needs (such as enjoying the fragrance of flowers, as a minor example). There are huge numbers of such pleasures which do not arise from need, and yet are perfectly acceptable to pursue in Epicurean terms so long as we evaluate them in accord with what the activity produces - net pleasure over pain.

To overemphasize satisfaction of basic needs as the goal of life would also tend toward asceticism and apathy, as I believe you commented earlier.

In fact I would go further and say that the word "tend" is a vast understatement. To focus on "needs" rather than "desires," and to fail to see that no pleasure is a bad thing in itself, will not only tend toward asceticism and apathy and stoicism, it would *demand* it.

That is why the entire framework of our understanding of pleasure needs to be re-examined according to Epicurean perspectives, because as it is now, our modern framework is totally corrupted.

If pleasure is the faculty given by Nature for us to know what to choose and to avoid, which I believe Epicurus teaches it is, then all who deprecate and attack pleasure as the goal are essentially "enemies of the human race."

Post by "Cassius" of June 19, 2019 at 9:02 AM

EC: Gaius Florius Lupus, actually, whether hunger is a pain or not depends on the person and the situation-- it is impossible for one person, from the "outside", to define pain and pleasure for another person, and this is an important feature of the philosophy- that pain and pleasure are subjective.

I only experience hunger as a pain if I think for some reason that my next meal is uncertain or will be significantly delayed beyond usual. Otherwise, hunger is part of the anticipation, and I enjoy it as a pleasure. I know from experience that waiting to eat until I am actually hungry, instead of by the clock, makes the meal much more enjoyable. As Ben Franklin said, "hunger is the best pickle."

I find this to be the case with all the necessary and natural pleasures. Sleep for instance-- it feels pleasurable to get tired and sleepy at the end of a day, unless for some reason I need to stay up instead, such as for work. Getting into bed when sleepy feels luxurious... a pleasure. Waking from sleep when I've gotten enough is another pleasure.

Our bodies have biological cycles that do not have to be occasions for pains, unless we are unable to attend to those needs when they arise.

Cassius Amicus: I agree with EC. As to this "that pain and pleasure are subjective" I agree as well. I would add that I think this too: Our individual experience of pain and pleasure is subjective, just like we individually see birds or trees or buildings depending on where we are and what direction we look.

In addition, I think Epicurus was intending to teach us that pain and pleasure also important to recognize as "faculties" just like seeing or hearing, and that is why they are placed in the canonical triad of faculties.

Everyone's individual experience is different at any moment, depending on circumstances, but it is also possible to develop a scientific understanding of pain and pleasure, just like it is possible to develop a science of optics and of audiology. We can study how pain and pleasure work to allow us to have a better understanding of the faculty, and thereby enhance them and improve their functioning, just like we can enhance the work of the eyes and of the ears with telescopes and hearing aids.

I write this comment because I think we face a major problem in discussing pleasure and pain. We discuss them today as if they are nothing more than individual discrete experiences which have no further significance, and which we can rank as "good" or "bad" as if there is some outside standard for them (religion, idealism).

But I think the more important perspective philosophically is to understand pleasure and pain as a faculty that is the one given by Nature for our guidance, and not allow that faculty to be replaced by divine revelation or the idea that logic/reason can provide "better" goals for living.

That's why Epicurus is damned from all quarters, because he is at war not only with divine religion, but with "the academy" which asserts logic and reason and "virtue" as alternate guidance systems to replace what Nature gave us.

Epicurus was not teaching a new system (such as religion or idealism) by which we should rank cookies or pies or sex or music as "good" or "bad." He was teaching us that we ourselves have a faculty, given by Nature, by which we reach those determinations without need for priests or academic experts.

Post by "Cassius" of June 26, 2019 at 8:17 AM

GFL: I am quite surprised about the statement that pain and pleasure are subjective. I understand that they are qualia, i.e their nature cannot be communicated, but they have to be experienced in order to be understood. It is one of the three faculties that we have as guidance to truth. Fire is objectively painful for everybody, just as the sweetness of sugar is pleasant to everybody.

Subjectiveness of pain and pleasure would make interactions with other people extremely difficult, if not impossible. It would mean I could torture others and then claim that it was not possible for me to know, whether it was painful or pleasurable to them. Objectiveness of pain and pleasure is given by the common physiological nature that we share as human beings.

Cassius Amicus Perhaps "contextual" would be a better word, and I bet Elayne can do better here than I will, but this is what I think is the point of the word "subjective":

Fire is not **always** painful - it warms us in winter, and in certain conditions fire applied to a part of the body for a short period may be the best remedy for a particular urgent problem, such as cauterizing a wound, and even be immediately pleasurable in ending some intense bodily pain.

Even the sweetness of sugar can become sickening after eating too much of something that is sweet in a short period of time.

To me this relates to the physics as explained by Lucretius in referring to the properties of elements and the qualities of the bodies that come together from the combination of elements. There are ranges of possibilities, and not only single results. That is as is referenced in book one of Lucretius:

"Therefore the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror *****to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deep-set boundary mark."*****

What we are talking about are natural limits and bounds that have within them in many cases wide ranges of different possibilities, and that applies to things that are painful and things that are pleasurable. They are innumerable, but within limits.

Pleasure is by definition always pleasurable, and pain is by definition always painful, but what precise conditions will cause a particular individual to feel pain, or pleasure, does not always follow the same pattern. Events that cause pleasure and pain are frequently subjective or contextual according to the particular makeup and context of the individual. In many cases it is only the resulting pleasure and pain that we perceive as "objective" to us, rather than something in the nature of the event that **always** produces the same result. (I should perhaps say ***all*** cases but for this discussion I will stay with ***many***.)

This is just in the same way that "virtue" is contextual rather than absolute, a point in Epicurus that is equally clear from sayings such as [PD10](#):

"10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligate men really freed them from fears of the mind concerning celestial and atmospheric phenomena, the fear of death, and the fear of pain; if, further, they taught them to limit their desires, we should never have any fault to find with such persons, for they would then be filled with pleasures from every source and would never have pain of body or mind, which is what is bad."

Cassius Amicus "Subjectiveness of pain and pleasure would make interactions with other people extremely difficult, if not impossible. " << And indeed, our different preferences in pleasure and pain DO make interactions with **some** other people "extremely difficult if not impossible." What you and I find pleasing as a way of life, Gaius Florius, I wager would make life very difficult for us were we to attempt to live the rest of our lives in downtown Mecca. Which differences in viewpoint on what we find pleasurable and painful is why some people get along very well with others, and some are constantly at war.

39. The man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life.

40. Those who possess the power to defend themselves against threats by their neighbors, being thus in possession of the surest guarantee of security, live the most pleasant life with one another....

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GFL: Cassius Amicus Do people really feel different things pleasurable, or do they not rather make wrong judgements? Is asceticism the result of people finding pleasure in hardship or not rather the delusional hope for an imaginary reward?

EC - GFL:, to say someone made a "wrong" judgment about pain or pleasure is to assert you have an absolute standard, which does not exist.

Because we are in the same species, there are certainly a great many events which will stimulate pain for most typical humans, or pleasure. It would be surprising if that were not so. This is more likely the case with events likely to cause severe tissue damage or death, given the role of pain as a warning signal.

But even for tissue damaging events, the only objective measure would be of damage or no damage. Not pain or no pain, which is subjective. If someone has no nerve function to respond to a burn, they are not making a wrong judgment when they report no pain-- the lack of pain is part of the diagnosis and is accurate. If someone feels phantom limb pain, the pain is real, even though the initial stimulus is gone.

For me, enjoying anticipatory hunger seems to accurately reflect that food is coming... but if someone else feels that as pain, I won't tell them they are wrong!

For other events, there can be wide variation. For instance, the taste of cilantro can be like soap for a significant portion of the population, due to genetic variation. Most of them don't like cilantro. Can you say which taste is a "wrong judgment"? I can't.

I enjoy classical music and opera-- I know people who act like they are being tortured by opera ?! Are they incorrect about their preferences in music? How would you ascertain that?

Cassius Amicus Gaius I am thinking that it is not quite exactly the right word to talk about a "judgment" of what is pleasurable. I am thinking that Epicurus stressed that pleasure is a "feeling" and that this section of On Ends was intended to address not only that pleasure is good, but what pleasure itself really is:

"Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"

GFL: Judgment is only required for actions, not for the distinction of pain and pleasure, which is simply a premise for our judgment.

I think we can keep physiological disorders out of the issue and focus on the statistical norm.

For non-discapacitated people the feeling of pain and pleasure is the same, yet their decisions differ.

Some people may prefer an unpleasant (bitter) taste, because it brings them back past memories, but the taste is still objectively bitter, i.e. unpleasant.

If we deny that pleasure and pain is the same for all, how can there even be a disagreement between Epicureans and Stoics? One could just say that Stoics get their pleasure from virtue.

Fact is, they do not. They make a wrong judgement about the reward for their arbitrary virtue.

It would be the same for a masochist that may claim that he gets pleasure from being flogged. He does not. He feels pain like anybody else. But he makes a wrong judgment and hopes for imaginary recognition and attention from the sadist.

Without objective standards for pleasure and pain, we would not need different philosophies, because everybody could just claim that it is his way to find pleasure.

Cassius Amicus "One could just say that Stoics get their pleasure from virtue." Yes I would say that some Stoics allege that they do get pleasure from virtue, and I would admit that some do get pleasure from virtue. I think the issue here is that we are not saying that abstractions cannot be pleasurable. Of course they can. The thought of living forever singing songs to God is

pleasurable, certainly, at least for a time. And Epicurus said that mental pleasures can be and often are more intense than physical ones.

I think the point that needs clarification is the issue stated in On Ends, which is what facts of reality truly produce the happiest life - in other words, how to "rationally" pursue pleasure: "But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of reprobating pleasure and extolling pain arose. To do so, I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure."

Epicurus did not condemn religion because of the pleasure it produced in the priests, at least in the short term, for them. And Epicurus made very clear that if the legends of the gods IN FACT produced the happiest life, then he would endorse it, just as he would endorse any depraved lifestyle that in fact produces happiness.

The truth is that religion does not produce the happiest life, because it is false, and those who believe in it are in the far greater number of cases vastly disappointed. Do some live their entire lives happily in a myth? Yes, and if so, more power to them, would be Epicurus' response. But living in a mirage is not reasonably calculated to lead to the happiest living for most people.

"Without objective standards for pleasure and pain, we would not need different philosophies, because everybody could just claim that it is his way to find pleasure."

But the point is not that our "objective standards" produce happy living. Nature does not care about our "objective standards." Nature created individual humans with particular concepts and their own capacities and faculties. Yes those faculties are not random, and yes they generally fall within a range of limits. But that range can be very wide, as wide as Islam is from Harvard-style atheist hedonism, and there is no "objective" way to resolve the differences of opinions between groups who are so divergent.

Unless you want to talk about military force or similar methods of genocide, because those are certainly capable of producing "objective" results. I am of course not suggesting that those are viable options, but the cliché about "no accounting for tastes" is a huge understatement. What I am saying is that the issue cannot be reduced to a taste-test to measure that 98% of people enjoy Coca-Cola original formula. Yes that kind of testing in raw bodily data is possible. But pleasure is a faculty that embraces both bodily and mental activities, and the range of mental activities that we find pleasurable or painful is so broad as to be practically limitless.

Elayne Coulter I am astonished that anyone could argue that differences in pain and pleasure are matters of judgment rather than feeling! They are matters of neurotransmitters. If someone gets a burst of serotonin, oxytocin, and/or endorphins from an experience, they are

experiencing pleasure, a feeling, not a thought.

Perhaps more examples will help?

Some people think The Three Stooges are funny-- they laugh spontaneously at slapstick comedy. In the pleasure category. Others get an instant sense of annoyance-- even to the point it would be torture to force them to watch. Pain. Yes, thoughts are involved, but the resulting pain and pleasure are feelings, and they happen within the person-- they are not properties of the Stooges.

Salt is an interesting one-- if a person has been sweating and is in need of salt, they crave more salt on their food and will feel pleasure eating it-- the same person would find that food too salty-- unpleasant, mild pain-- on another day. This is one of the ways we have evolved to intuitively regulate our salt balance, through pain and pleasure under different circumstances. This is for a normal person, not any sort of disorder.

I know people who love hot peppers-- it causes release of pleasurable endorphins. Yes, they feel it as hot, but they also feel pleasure. For me, it's hot and painful, no pleasure. The feeling is the response, not the stimulus.

Our evolved biological resemblances lead to many pain and pleasure experiences in agreement.

The difference in philosophy is about the role of pleasures and their contribution to a happy life. Although we can make some generalizations, due to shared genes, about actions that will cause pleasure or pain for most of us, that's not the most important part of EP, in my opinion. The important part is understanding that happiness consists of pleasures, and so to be happy, one ought to pay attention to what decisions bring about the most net pleasure. It's great to learn from the reactions most humans have-- but it's also critical to observe one's own, individual preferences. Otherwise you might mistakenly choose or avoid slapstick, salty food, or hot pepper based on what brings other people pleasure.

Cassius Amicus This from Elayne is an example of the point being made about Stoicism or any other emotional / intellectual experience. And it isn't even necessary to see or here them sat the moment - simply recalling the three stooges to mind can be pleasurable or painful:

"Some people think The Three Stooges are funny-- they laugh spontaneously at slapstick comedy. In the pleasure category. Others get an instant sense of annoyance-- even to the point it would be torture to force them to watch. Pain. Yes, thoughts are involved, but the resulting pain and pleasure are feelings, and they happen within the person-- they are not properties of the Stooges."

It is a huge mistake to limit the range of pleasure to food, air, etc.

GFL: First I would like to thank everybody for this pleasant discussion with so many well-thought arguments. This is something rather unusual these days on Facebook.

Elayne brought up some complex examples, like our different reaction to the same stimulus (pepper). I have not enough data to give an answer to this and I think the issue is still subject to scientific research. I recently read a study about why some people prefer bitter tastes like coffee and others do not.

However I would like to clarify a less complex issue, where I think I was misunderstood. Pleasure and pain is not subject to judgment, it is data. We have a sense that tells us exactly if and how much painful/pleasant an experience is. Judgment is necessary for our actions. And here we can be wrong, because we might not correctly identify the cause of our pleasure.

I have three simple examples:

1. A person might decide to get drunk, because he had a lot of fun last weekend while being drunk. He went to a club, met nice people and enjoyed the evening. However when he tries to repeat the pleasant experience, he insults other people while being drunk, gets into a quarrel with his friend, falls from the stairs on his way back home and has a hangover next morning – all in all a very unpleasant experience.

The reason for it is the wrong judgment. Because it was not the state of ebriety that caused his pleasure, but other circumstances that coincided with it. The wrong judgment of equaling ebriety with pleasure caused the wrong decision to get drunk and a lot of unpleasant events.

2. A monk may think that asceticism and deprivation of all bodily pleasures will give him happiness in the afterlife. So he leads a miserable life in the monastery that he does not enjoy at all. He gets bitter and angry but imagines that after death he will be rewarded in a way that overcompensates his suffering. The more he suffers, the closer he thinks he will get to paradise, which at least sporadically gives him a positive feeling. If we follow Epicurus' teachings there is no existence after death. So all his sacrifices were in vain and the overall balance of happiness in his life was negative. Again a wrong judgment caused more pain than pleasure.

3. The last example is the wide-spread belief that money equals happiness. Some people may commit crimes or betray their friends with the goal to obtain money and reach a point in life, when they have so much money that they will be completely happy. Statistical data however shows that the opposite is true. Wealth does not lead to happiness and the likelihood of suicide is much higher among wealthy people as compared to people around the poverty level. Again a wrong judgment about what causes happiness led to a wrong decision.

All these three people would have confirmed to you that this is their personal way to find happiness and that they know better than anybody else, what gives them happiness. But objectively they were wrong. It did not give them happiness; they misidentified what actually gives pleasure to them. This is where the wrong judgment comes in.

EC -- GFL:, yes! That is why using our actual feelings of pain and pleasure, not reasoning based on misinformation, is so important! These people are trying to define happiness as something other than pleasure, and that will definitely lead a person away from happiness.

I will just say for alcohol, it isn't just the circumstances that cause the pleasure or pain-- it's a combination of the chemical effects, the dose, the person's particular physiology/enzyme variants and capacity, plus the circumstances-- and this is a situation that calls for assessing net effects. Because some actions do cause immediate, true pleasure, but the net effects are painful. Meaning, there doesn't have to be misattribution of the source of pleasure for the overall effects to be unpleasant and therefore advised against.

Maybe a good example would be a person having intense enjoyment of the taste of a certain food... but this food contributes to their type 2 diabetes being poorly controlled. Later they lose their vision and have their feet amputated because they didn't consider the net effects. Whereas another person with no predisposition to diabetes can eat the same delicious food and live to 100 with no trouble. In this case, both had immediate pleasure but only one had net pain.

Cassius Amicus Probably even the diabetic example shows how hard it is to make the decision for someone else. Who gets to decide the "net pleasure" calculation - if having a foot amputated a month before death is worth a lifetime of eating the food that someone really enjoys? I don't know myself what my answer would be to that. No doubt it would depend on all sorts of hard-to-predict individual variables about how long one thinks one would live, etc. If I were a kamikaze pilot, or both my parents had died at age 50 for 5 generations from heart attacks unrelated to diabetes, I might not give as much thought to the effect of diabetes at age 80.

This is no detraction from Epicurus though. Just because it's difficult to calculate, or even to know how to calculate, the net final effects of a particular decision, that doesn't mean that we should fall back to decision-making based on false gods or false idealism. Each of us has to make our own estimate of the effects of our actions, because there is no god or no absolute standard making the decision for us. And in particular, no god looks to reward us in an afterlife for intentionally under-achieving in our pursuit of pleasure.

EC - Cassius, I agree! It would depend on that person's own degree of pleasure and pain-- it's useful to consider the big picture when making those decisions, but ultimately only the person deciding can know which path has more pleasure!

GFL: I am strongly convinced that to all problems there is only one logically correct answer and it can be objectively established. The risk and possible benefit of a lifestyle choice can be precisely calculated. It is called "expected utility rule" and a way to make rational decisions under uncertainty. You can for example take statistical data about diabetes into account. One does not automatically become an expert in something, because it affects oneself. It is useful to take professional advice, even when it comes to maximization of pleasure due to its objective nature.

EC - GFL: I am a physician, and I can assure you that medicine is not that advanced. I can tell a patient the probability of something happening for an average patient (who doesn't exist), but I cannot tell that person what she enjoys most.

If a specific objective health outcome is the goal, I can give data, which is often very unclear, with multiple confounding factors.

If subjective pleasure is the goal, I must ask the patient what she enjoys in life. I have no direct measurement of pleasure available at this time. If you mean surveys to ask people to rate their pleasure in different circumstances, there is significant variation between humans.

Cassius Amicus "I am strongly convinced that to all problems there is only one logically correct answer and it can be objectively established."

And as a committed atomist who doesn't believe in a supernatural god, a realm of ideal forms, or a center of the universe from which there is one "correct" perspective, I am strongly convinced that to all human ethical problems (which is I think what we are talking about) there are many possible options, and that the individuals concerned are by nature given the ultimate criteria by which to choose between those options. (And that ultimate criteria is their own feeling of pleasure and pain, by which I mean to include ****all**** their mental and bodily feelings of pleasures and pains.)

GFL: There are many options to choose from, but only one reasonable one.

This is what I like about Epicurus. He does not need beliefs or feelings. All of his teachings can be concluded from empirical observation without additional assumptions.

"Nothing should be believed, except that, which has been tested through direct observation and logical deduction."

He is the father of the modern scientific method.

Cassius Amicus Yes as to the importance of observation and deduction, but the irony that you are not incorporating is that in the end, observation and deduction show us that the only thing that "matters" is feeling!

Cassius Amicus What is the root of saying that something "matters" to us? What is the root of saying that something has "meaning" or "meaningfulness" to us? In the end, those words all add up to "we have a **feeling** about it, or "it causes a **feeling** within us." In the end, all of the innumerable specific feelings we have can be considered to be (if we want to assign words)

either pleasurable or painful to us.

EC - Oh, my! Without feelings of pain to warn us of tissue damage, we would not survive very long! Without feelings of pleasure, we have anhedonia, a key symptom of depression, and we would not care about surviving.

Feelings of pain and pleasure are not only essential to guide choices for long term pleasure/happiness- they are essential for survival. It doesn't take much observation of animal life to come to this conclusion!