

# Is Pleasure the Only Good?

**Post by “Joshua” of September 15, 2019 at 2:05 PM**

We often say as a kind of shorthand that pleasure is the only good. This isn't wrong, but like all shorthands, it may be open to misconstruction. What I think we mean by this is: "Pleasure is the only [intrinsic] good [in life]." This is merely a way of speaking about value; pleasure is good because it has intrinsic value. Pizza (like the slice of Sbarro I'm eating as I type this) seems to be good, but it's only good by virtue of utility; the value of pizza is extrinsic, deriving only from the net pleasure it can deliver. "But does it not have value as nourishment?" Yes, but the value of nourishment is likewise extrinsic. It provides the energy we need for life, and the end or goal of life is the only intrinsic good; pleasure.

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**Post by “Godfrey” of September 15, 2019 at 3:04 PM**

Aren't there lots of intrinsic (natural?) goods? Eating, drinking, breathing, shelter, etc, but the GOAL of any good is pleasure. An intrinsic good is necessary for survival, but we pursue it to attain pleasure and/or avoid pain. So pleasure would be considered the goal rather than just a good.

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**Post by “Godfrey” of September 15, 2019 at 3:08 PM**

This is also why one doesn't pursue all pleasures, as some are more trouble than they're worth as described in PD 8 for instance.

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**Post by “Cassius” of September 15, 2019 at 4:20 PM**

I agree with all the comments and think that the basic thrust is a problem with definitions. We know what pleasure is because we feel it, but we don't know what "good" means because it is an abstraction. That means our definitions of "good" have to be very careful, and it may not be

going too far to say that that was what Epicurus was warning against, and that "good" really has no "intrinsic" meaning at all. Does any abstraction have meaning other than what we say it means? But pleasure is not an abstraction - pleasure is a feeling which we don't require abstractions to perceive.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of September 15, 2019 at 4:30 PM**

Thank you, Godfrey! This is what I'm trying to nail down here. It was Cassius' post in another thread that got me thinking about the question;

#### Quote

The reason O'Keefe finds the relationship between nature and goodness "far from straightforward" is because O'Keefe refuses to follow Epicurus to his conclusions. Nature gives us only pleasure as the guide to what is desirable, and there is nothing "good" other than pleasure.

Possibly I'm wrong in my interpretation, but I don't think that eating and drinking are intrinsic goods. In so far as there is a *desire* to drink water, it is natural (not intrinsically good; just natural). The satisfaction of the desire is necessary, at least in the long run. But the only intrinsic good worth pursuing as an end in itself is pleasure.

Maybe the whole concept of "good" just muddies the water. DeWitt believed that there was a fault with the Romans who translated *telos* as *summum bonum*. In his view, the "good" is life itself, and the "end" of life is pleasure.

I'm really just thinking through this out loud 😊

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### **Post by “Joshua” of September 15, 2019 at 4:31 PM**

And thank you Cassius! I see we crossed while typing.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of September 15, 2019 at 4:42 PM**

In terms of thinking things through out loud, that's really helpful. Not just to the initial poster: it also gives others a chance to mull over particular ideas 👍

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 15, 2019 at 6:43 PM**

Yes Joshua we are going exactly in the same direction. Eating and drinking do produce life-sustaining results, and are at times (most times) pleasurable. But I think if we rigorously track down the WHY of everything we do, we always come back to "the feeling of pleasure" as the reward. Were it not ultimately for the feeling of pleasure, there would be no reason to do anything --- I doubt it is valid even to consider that without the feeling of pleasure we would be mechanisms or robots, because in order to exist I think it is implicit that those machines had intentional creators, the existence of which Epicurean physics would deny.

Although the opening of Lucretius can appear muddy due to the nature of "the gods" I think it's important and correct to lead off with a hymn to "pleasure" as the motivating force of all life.

Although it would be off course and a wide tangent to follow it now, I presume that given the eternal / infinite universe Epicurus would say that it is incorrect to talk about there ever being a "first" pleasure or a "first living thing" --- which I think makes for an interesting topic of conversation (maybe another thread) about the implications of that.