

# On "Happiness" As An Abstraction / "Pleasure" As a Feeling

**Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2019 at 12:13 PM**

[Admin note 1/11/21 - Something has happened the image from the autarkist blog referenced below. I'll try to reconstruct what the image was, but in the meantime the article referred to is [probably this one.](#)]

Some time ago Hiram pointed to a book by Lampe entitled "The Birth of Hedonism" and made this statement on his Autarkist blog:

Lampe thinks that Cyrenaics are eudaimonics (believed in happiness as the end, not just pleasure), but most scholars disagree. It's likely that a variety of views existed within the school regarding the end. One of the key arguments for hedonism (i.e. pleasure as the end) in its inception had to do with how pleasure is not the same thing as happiness. Pleasure is an instance, happiness is a collection of pleasures, and as such happiness is therefore an abstraction, a platonized alternative to the real experience of pleasure. This argument is interesting, and still generates debate and various opinions today.

I have been wanting to track that down and finally today I found the page which is being referenced here:

I will once again begin by presenting the evidence.

They also think that the end differs from happiness, since the particular pleasure is an end, but happiness is the composition of particular

pleasures, among which are numbered both those that have gone by and those that are to come. The particular pleasure is choiceworthy for itself; happiness is not choiceworthy for itself, but for particular pleasures. A proof that pleasure is the end is that we are favorably inclined to it without deliberate choice from childhood, and when we have attained it, we seek nothing further, and avoid nothing so much as hurt, which is opposed to it. (D.L. 2.87–88)

Those called the Annicereans from the Cyrenaic succession put no definite end in place for the whole of life, but said that the pleasure arising from each action is the private end of that action. (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 2.21.130.7 = SSR 4g.4)

It is best to look at these passages as presenting three complementary arguments for the same radical thesis, which is that happiness is not the end. In the first part of the first report Diogenes appears to be aiming at the finality criterion for the end on the basis of the theory of the experiences. He begins by distinguishing between “the particular pleasure” (*hē kata meros hēdonē* or *hē merikē hēdonē*) and happiness, which is the composition of particular pleasures. The Cyrenaics declare the former to be the end because it is choiceworthy for itself. The easiest way to explain this claim is by noting that according to the theory of the experiences, each individual pleasure is unmistakably choiceworthy for itself and in itself.<sup>85</sup> Because happiness is an abstraction generated from many experiences, it is not unmistakably choiceworthy in the same way. Since one of the formal criteria for the end is that it be the final explanatory principle for what is choiceworthy, this implies that particular pleasures rather than happiness are ends.

This is another situation where words can be used in different ways, and it is necessary to be precise. Lampe's reference here does a good job of clarifying the issue being discussed. He is talking about the Cyreniacs, but if we just step back and think about the topic in general, then this passage makes clear a distinction between the words "happiness" and "pleasure," and probably explains why Epicurus used both words in different contexts.

In general and most frequently, it seems to me that when people use the word "happiness" in philosophical discussion it is very difficult to be sure what they mean, and how to unpack the definition. On the other hand, again generally, "pleasure" or "pleasing" generally refers to a "feeling" for which this statement from Torquatus applies:

We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; 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.

What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?

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All of which is not to be negative about "happiness" being an abstraction, because abstractions are incredibly useful. But in order to be clear as to what we mean we have to be very precise, and there are huge variations in opinion as to what makes a person "happy."

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**Post by "Don" of January 11, 2021 at 12:29 PM**

[ADMIN NOTE: This is an very important discussion that needs to be findable in the future, so I clipped the next several posts from another thread and pasted them here, in an older thread directly on point]

I get where you're coming from. I do have a question:

[Quote from Matt](#)

My position is this...pleasure is the goal. Happiness is the goal.

Which is it? Technically, those are two goals. You can't run both ways down the field. 😊

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### **Post by “Matt” of January 11, 2021 at 12:35 PM**

I would reply: On the tried and true observations of nature made by myself with my own senses and further bolstered by the testimonies of others who have spent their lives studying nature.

If the narrative of those who study nature (scientists) rapidly and unanimously shifts into a contrary model. More than just "adapting" some new ideas to ancient ones, to where doubt is raised to whether Nothing comes from Nothing or whether the Universe is infinite, then that might be a time where we need to reevaluate some things, but I believe as it stands currently the materialist model of the universe appears to be fairly consistent. Even with new discoveries.

If scientists are going to unanimously start *preaching* pantheism and creationism etc. presumably they will come bearing significant evidence? More so than anecdotal evidence from religionists.

But that hasn't happened yet, not as a unanimously agreed upon concept.

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### **Post by “Matt” of January 11, 2021 at 12:39 PM**

Hahaha Don you have a sharp eye, I'll have to watch myself...yes they are one in the same. You can't be happy without pleasure, you cannot have pleasure and not be happy.

PLEASURE IS THE GOAL. 😄😄

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 11, 2021 at 1:03 PM

### [Quote from Matt](#)

I'll have to watch myself...yes they are one in the same.

Is it? 😊 I think that's actually one of the subtexts that we are discussing. Are they really "one and the same"? I would say that we likely have to view them differently -- pleasure is a feeling which we know without logical analysis; happiness may also be thought of as feeling, but seems to be a higher-level construction that contains mental operations beyond just feeling. Of course the word "pleasure" is not itself a feeling, but a word that denominates a feeling.

I guess this is why Epicurus was wise to refer more centrally to pleasure than to "happiness," but more than that, it's probably an important part of Epicurean philosophy to explain this point and prevent people from being confused in their own minds about this.

And that's where we get back to the issues of science and theories etc -- we can point to the feeling of pleasure and observe instances of it, but don't we also want to be able to explain in words to other people what we're talking about? So we have to move not only from observation of instances to a systematized explanation that people can understand, and that's not altogether easy to do.

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## Post by “Matt” of January 11, 2021 at 1:27 PM

I didn't mean to get into the weeds with this... but my "happiness" is entirely dependent on my pleasurable living.

Happiness is a fairly abstract concept that also loses a significant amount of meaning since it is over used. But my usage of it is describing my state of being while experiencing pleasure.

But the general state of "happiness" would be dependent on if I am living pleurably. To be specific...PLEASURE is the end, but my general state of having pleasure makes me "happy." For lack of a better word. Elated? Joyous? Content?

I am "pleasured" by a "pleasurable experience" in a state of "pleasurable feeling"...

### **Post by “Matt” of January 11, 2021 at 1:31 PM**

I *personally* understand the specifics, but I understand that it is necessary to differentiate for someone who might get confused by using both happiness and pleasure as the goal. When getting down to very specific details.

In the end it's always best to say pleasure. I agree.

One thing I will say is that the word "happiness" has a certain impact just in causal conversation, not necessarily splitting hairs in an analytical type discussion like we are having. I'm using it in a very casual sense. You all (I'm certain) understood what I meant.

Like if I were to have a conversation with someone about what they want in life..."happiness" is very likely is going to be a word that is used in their response. Now that of course that opens the door into "how do we get there (to happiness)? And in that conversation we discuss how *pleasure* is the how you become happy.

But the average person usually isn't going to outright say in conversation (unless they are a closet hedonist) that they desire *pleasure*, they will more likely say they desire "happiness"... ultimately we all know they mean pleasure and pleasurable living, but the replacement word is "happiness."

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 11, 2021 at 2:44 PM**

Is happiness considered a "state," whereas pleasure can be considered both an "instance" or a "state?" This drifts into the territory of katastematic and kinetic pleasure....

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 11, 2021 at 3:02 PM**

Thanks for your question Godfrey - it prompted me to move these comments under the thread started back in 2019. It's long past time to discuss this further!

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### **Post by “Don” of January 11, 2021 at 4:08 PM**

My quick reaction to that thread heading is pleasure (vs pain) is a reaction to something. I would agree happiness is an abstract concept.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subjectiv...ing?wprov=sfla1>

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 11, 2021 at 4:54 PM**

Could happiness be another name for continuous pleasure? Maybe that depends on how one defines happiness. But happiness is quite pleasant. 😊 Anyway this would make happiness a feeling and not a concept.

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### **Post by “Don” of January 11, 2021 at 5:32 PM**

I'm thinking happiness is more of a process or state or condition: the state of a continued subjective sense of well-being or contentment.

"I am happy" has a spectrum of meaning.

That's what I find so intriguing about the range of words translated as happy from the texts:

makarios, eudaimonia, then types of happiness like euphrosyne and khara.

"I am happy" has so many shades as to be almost open to meaning anything unless we say "I know it when I see it."

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 11, 2021 at 6:17 PM**

"That's what I find so intriguing about the range of words translated as happy from the texts: makarios, eudaimonia, then types of happiness like euphrosyne and khara."

Don is it safe to presume that these words had different shades of meaning, so that using happiness in each case is almost certainly overbroad?

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## Post by “Elayne” of January 11, 2021 at 6:53 PM

I did a poll once of my FB friends on whether happiness is a feeling or a concept. They said feeling except for one person. The songs "Don't worry, be happy", "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands"-- these are feeling songs. To use it abstractly is a philosophy attempt to denigrate feeling by saying your happy feeling isn't real happiness-- you should seek an abstract ideal instead. It's the ivory tower against the people, trying to make life esoteric ☐. That's Platonic, to make it abstract.

I use it the way ordinary people do, as an expression of a pleasurable feeling.

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## Post by “Don” of January 11, 2021 at 6:56 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

"That's what I find so intriguing about the range of words translated as happy from the texts: makarios, eudaimonia, then types of happiness like euphrosyne and khara."

Don is it safe to presume that these words had different shades of meaning, so that using happiness in each case is almost certainly overbroad?

Yep 😊

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## Post by “Matt” of January 11, 2021 at 7:58 PM

Well I'm happy that we are hashing this out. ☐

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## Post by “Don” of January 11, 2021 at 8:22 PM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

I did a poll once of my FB friends on whether happiness is a feeling or a concept. They said feeling except for one person. The songs "Don't worry, be happy", "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands"-- these are feeling songs. To use it abstractly is a philosophy attempt to denigrate feeling by saying your happy feeling isn't real happiness-- you should seek an abstract ideal instead. It's the ivory tower against the people, trying to make life esoteric ☐☐. That's Platonic, to make it abstract.

I use it the way ordinary people do, as an expression of a pleasurable feeling.

I don't agree. The feeling/reaction to a situation or stimulus is \*pleasure.\* "Being happy" is the cognitive response to that feeling of pleasure. "Happiness" is the state of being that you are aware of yourself being in when you experience sequential pleasurable sensations over a certain duration.

If I say "I'm happy," one can ask "Why are you happy?" This thing and this thing and this event "make" me happy. Happiness can often be broken down into constituent parts.

"If I say "Aaaaaaah" as i close my eyes and look up on a warm sunlit day, I'm experiencing pleasure. I may also think "I'm happy" at that moment but that comes after the actual sensation of pleasure.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of January 11, 2021 at 8:34 PM**

Awareness of sequential pleasure would be nothing if not for the fact that such awareness itself is pleasure, and I am quite certain I myself experience it as a feeling ☐☐ and not a cognition.

If a person felt guilty about pleasure, awareness of sequential pleasure wouldn't feel happy but painful.

I do think Platonism has penetrated culture sufficiently that there are some people who define the word conceptually. But I stand by my assertion that most ordinary people, non academics, "feel happy" rather than "think happy."

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### **Post by “Elayne” of January 11, 2021 at 8:35 PM**

words always come second to feelings for me, including the word pleasure. The words are just for communication.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 11, 2021 at 9:39 PM**

This difference in perspective among people keyed into the issues is fascinating!

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### **Post by “Don” of January 11, 2021 at 9:44 PM**

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

Awareness of sequential pleasure would be nothing if not for the fact that such awareness itself is pleasure, and I am quite certain I myself experience it as a feeling ☐ and not a cognition.

Okay, I'll give you that. But you're still just precognitively reacting to stimuli with the sensation of pleasure. I keep coming back to the fact that humans react to stimuli with either pleasure or pain (I'm trying to stay within the Epicurean canon). We describe how that sensation makes us "feel" with language, but we experience the sensation itself precognitively.

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

If a person felt guilty about pleasure, awareness of sequential pleasure wouldn't feel happy but painful.

Interesting premise although I don't think that's the case. One can't experience pleasure "as" pain. They would be experiencing pain. What you seem to be describing is how someone would be thinking about their feelings which sounds contrary to your next statement.

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

I do think Platonism has penetrated culture sufficiently that there are some people who define the word conceptually. But I stand by my assertion that most ordinary people, non academics, "feel happy" rather than "think happy."

I don't think Platonism is at play here. We're not defining an ideal happiness.

Are you then simply using the same word "happy" to stand in for "pleasure"? What about all the [synonyms for happy](#)?

I'm not saying you "think happy". What I'm saying is that:

1) A person experiences the sensation of what is called "pleasure" as opposed to a sensation of "pain" or they are experiencing more pleasure right now than pain.

2) That person interprets that sensation as "making" them happy. At the speed of thought, so it might appear simultaneous. But the sensation comes first. The description comes second.

People can try to convince themselves to say they're happy. You can't fool yourself as to sensing pleasure or pain.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of January 11, 2021 at 11:58 PM**

I think you're making it more complicated than it is. I'm just talking definitions. All language is necessarily an abstract representation, including when it comes to feelings. I am saying that most people, including me, use the word happy to communicate a feeling of pleasure. Not a thought or analysis but a simple feeling.

There are many words for pleasurable feelings of various types, which shouldn't be surprising considering the huge numbers of ways our brains can be affected by various pleasurable neurotransmitters. There is serotonin, oxytocin, different endorphins and endocannabinoids, along with a variety of receptors for each in different parts of the nervous system. All of which can be combined in a huge variety of proportions, locations, and intensities!

I'm not sure why you don't agree that awareness of having had sequential pleasure would be painful if the person thought they weren't supposed to feel pleasure? That happens all the time with people in repressive religions, with sex. They feel guilty, sometimes simultaneously with pleasure.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 12, 2021 at 1:25 AM**

I agree with Elayne's post #22 above. However the definitive term for pleasure/happiness, per the synonyms link in post #21, is actually "cock-a-hoop." 🤪

## Post by “Don” of January 12, 2021 at 8:06 AM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

I'm not sure why you don't agree that awareness of having had sequential pleasure would be painful if the person thought they weren't supposed to feel pleasure? That happens all the time with people in repressive religions, with sex. They feel guilty, sometimes simultaneously with pleasure.

Oh, I'm not saying they don't feel pleasure nor that they don't feel guilty/pain. They're human. They sense pleasure and pain. But if they feel pleasure and say they aren't happy, then their pleasure causes them pain in sequence. Or there's a mixture of pleasure and pain, but they can't exist simultaneously in the same moment. I'll posit an alternative though. I could maybe see parallels to people taking pleasure in eating hot peppers. They've acclimated themselves to sense the pain of the burn with pleasure. But I still think that's cognition. Similar to religious guilt where they've trained themselves to interpret pleasure as bad/painful. The pleasure is still there. That's a human sensation. It's in the interpretation where things go awry. They may not be conscious of it since it's so ingrained. But the non-judgemental sensation leads to the subjective "feeling".

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## Post by “Elayne” of January 12, 2021 at 8:43 AM

[Don](#) I think maybe I see what you are doing. Yes, a mental process, cognition, can also cause pain or pleasure! That was one of Epicurus' major themes, that pleasure is both through the sense organs and through various thoughts, such as memories. If the reaction to thoughts is desirable, something we enjoy, it is a felt sensation-- a feeling. Not the thought itself but a response to the thought. Happiness for most is a feeling of pleasure, whether or not a thought is what triggered it. I feel happiness as a strong wave of pleasure in my body.

Here is the cause of pleasure with painful hot peppers-- it is not cognitive. The pain fibers are being stimulated and this triggers the release of endorphins. For some people more than others. I'm not a fan, lol. I get enough pleasure in ways that don't make me cry ☹️.

It's possible that the apparently simultaneous feeling of pleasure in one part of the body and pain in another is just extremely rapid attentional task-switching-- but if so, it is so rapid that it is too fast for us to consciously experience sometimes, and feelings are experiential. I have felt simultaneous pain and pleasure-- not mixed (a different thing), but both seemingly at once. It is similar to vision-- neurologically, I am not really seeing the wide field of objects I experience

seeing simultaneously. But because that very rapid process of filling in the whole field is impossible to experience consciously, I experience the act of seeing the whole visual field.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of January 13, 2021 at 3:51 PM**

#### Quote

33. The cry of the flesh is not to be hungry, thirsty, or cold; for he who is free of these and is confident of remain so might vie even with Zeus for happiness.

I cite this passage because the words "confident to remain so" seems to me to be the crucial distinguishing factor between pleasure and happiness. I liked the way Cassius formulated it; pleasure is a direct feeling, happiness is a higher level construction that involves pleasure, but the hope of continued pleasure and the absence of fear.

Epicurus' core teaching about death is that it is "nothing" to us. This is essential. If what awaited us beyond the grave was eternal torment, no amount or length of pleasure would be adequate to keep us happy. We have to know where we're 'going' with it, in our life and after it.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2021 at 5:55 PM**

#### [Quote from JJElbert](#)

Epicurus' core teaching about death is that it is "nothing" to us. This is essential. If what awaited us beyond the grave was eternal torment, no amount or length of pleasure would be adequate to keep us happy.

I particularly agree with that Joshua, even though not everyone might think this is essential. I personally see this as very similar to specific positions on the nature of the gods, and on the eternality / infinity issue. Not everyone is going to feel the same way, but my personal bet is that 80% of the world would never even entertain a philosophy-of-life seriously unless it took a position on these questions.