

Can We Experience Pleasure in One Part of Our Experience and Pain In Another Part of our Experience At the Same Time?

Post by "Cassius" of January 5, 2020 at 8:57 AM

This is a subject that has come up before and I will probably move this to the ethics subforum later. I see an issue here on the question of how we describe the sum of our experience at any one moment, in which I think there is an issues that (1) our experience at any one moment probably contains all sorts of feelings, mental and physical, but which obviously can't be focused on at one time, and how this relates to (2) pleasure and pain being distinct feelings that never blend together to form a third type of feeling.

This comes up today because I see a facebook comment from [Mike Anyayahan](#) and I composed this comment about it. I'll post it here as a general comment to see what people think about this:

Mike: I saw you posted this on your timeline: "**Mental pleasure exists only when you have peace of mind. Peace of mind exists only when you have no more fears and worries. Fears and worries exist only if you are still wanting. You are still wanting only when you have no limit in what you want.**"

I think I see a thread of thought there which might be worth discussing -- the "only" part. I think it is correct Epicurean thought to point out that pleasure and pain are separate feelings and do not blend together. However it is probably also true that we experience many different types of feelings at different times, and even at the same time in different parts of our experience, so I would think it is possible to experience some feelings of mental pleasure while also having a concern that there are worries that need to be addressed (which I think is probably what peace of mind involves). So I would question the "only." Also, the last two sentences might be read to mean that wants should be extinguished, which I don't think would be a correct Epicurean statement.

And factually, it is probably not true that "you are still wanting only when you have no limit to what you want" is it? I am thinking there that the "limit to what you want" is a conceptual point of view that is highly useful for us to think about in debating the nature of pleasure. However as far as day to day life goes I think you can probably be a good Epicurean, acknowledging that pleasure has a limit (as discussed by PD3, Elayne, and elsewhere in this thread), and still feeling hungry when you have not eaten all day.

These comments are largely nitpicks but I think what you are writing is intended to be seen as a general statement of a "rule." So I am thinking that some of the points could probably be tightened up to be more accurate to the Epicurean viewpoint (which I am presuming is your goal there).

Post by "Charles" of January 5, 2020 at 2:51 PM

A great thread Cassius, I've actually been grappling with the concept over the past week and a half, and was meaning to make a thread when I felt confident enough to present it

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think it is correct Epicurean thought to point out that pleasure and pain are separate feelings and do not blend together.

This is specifically what I've been thinking about, and the concept its been has been whether or not pain and pleasure aren't on the black and white axis that almost everybody treats it as such, but rather a polarity where both can attach themselves to a center, what we define as experience. Thus, this leads to the possibility of feeling pain and pleasure simultaneously, hence the multiple interpretations of how we actually achieve pleasure, since it can either be through the removal or fulfillment of desire with that pleasure actually achieved through indulgence (both minimalist or "maximalist" hedonism combined with the calculus, which combines the latter for the calculus removes the pain ie VS 21), or pleasure achieved through the removal of pain and the ataraxia that follows (which I find it can be a slippery slope to asceticism, personally).

We have PD 3 and 4 and the two, at least for me seem to contradict, yet can be mended by VS 37.

PD 3: "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. **Wherever pleasure is present**, as long as it is there, **there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.**"

PD 4: "Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses **permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh.**"

VS 37: "Nature is weak toward evil, not toward good: because it is **saved by pleasures, but destroyed by pains.**"

Now, PD 8 tells us that no pleasure is bad in itself but can lead to greater pain than the initial pleasure. But what about if the current pleasure continues when that new pain arises? A person at a party in the company of friends, could be suffering from mild alcohol poisoning (pain) yet be having the time of their life (pleasure) in the form of the music, atmosphere, the drink itself, or any other number of factors that culminate in a higher sense of pleasure than the pain of their liver and intoxication. The key here isn't determining the measurement of how much pleasure these other factors add up to, or how bad the pain from the intoxication is, its the quantity, as what is more pleasurable is superseding the current pain they are experiencing.

There are of course, a ton of other "situations" both hypothetical and completely grounded in reality, instead of a party-goer, we can look at a mountain climber admiring in awe, the summit they had just climbed and the view afterwards despite their sore feet and immense hunger/thirst. While I disagree that pain and pleasure can blend into a new feeling, we cannot deny that there are many instances in which pain and pleasure are both experienced simultaneously, and its up to us and the quantity, or magnitude of pain/pleasure to determine what we currently experience.

As I mentioned at the start of this comment, my thinking on this hasn't been polished enough, but upon seeing this thread I could not help but share my thoughts. I'd love to hear some feedback on this thread, of what Mike, Cassius, and I have said.

Post by "Cassius" of January 5, 2020 at 4:43 PM

Yes Charles please keep going as you have time. I know Elayne has thoughts on this issue as well. As I see it , it seems to break down for me first into issues of awareness, and being aware of multiple things at the same time, which I think is possible, so that some things you are aware of are pleasurable and others are painful in different parts of your experience at the same time. I would think Epicurus would say that that is possible, but Elayne may have some thoughts on that.

But then there is the theoretical / logical side of this problem, which is where I think Epicurus thought it was important to keep the two in distinct categories without compromise or blending of multiple observations at the same time.

This takes us back to [Philebus](#) and the "purity" argument, because if you admit to blends of pleasure and pain then you are faced with the contradiction that you then must have some

science that tells you what blend is "best." So long as you keep pain and pleasure separate, pleasure is always desirable and pain is always undesirable, but definition. But if you admit "mixed" states then you are forced to come up with some other standard of choice, other than PLEASURE, by which to choose what mixture is best. This leads you down the path of embracing "Wisdom" or "reason" as the factor by which to choose, and if you make wisdom or reason your ultimate factor of choice, then you end up displacing pleasure as the ultimate guide of life.

I know I am truncating the argument way too much, but I know that this last part I just stated is in [Philebus](#), and I believe it is critical to link Epicurus' arguments to these logical disputes, for which I think they are his answers.

Even if there are reasons to question the "awareness" issues I mention above (and again I cannot recall Elayne's full positions on this) I still think that the logical issues are themselves sufficient to explain Epicurus' argument (though ultimately I think the logical issues and the awareness issues go hand in hand).

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 1:04 PM

[Cassius](#) Thanks for taking time to dig deeply on my post. Here is my response to your concerns:

“Mental pleasure exists only when you have peace of mind.”

Your question in mind is the “only” part of my statement. More or less, you have already answered it by saying “I think it is correct Epicurean thought to point out that pleasure and pain are separate feelings and do not blend together.”

To provide you with the basis of my statement, here is a portion of what Torquatus presented in the Book 1 part 11 paragraph 38 of Cicero’s *On Ends*: “Epicurus consequently maintained that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order.”

So there is only pleasure when there is no pain. Although I know it is also true when you said “I would think it is possible to experience some feelings of mental pleasure while also having a concern that there are worries that need to be addressed,” this could happen alternatively at a time.

However, I still can’t imagine if it happens at the same time because as far as I know pleasure is a product or result of the removal of pain and not two entities that can take place at one

particular moment or state. Here is my basis where I also got from the same book in the paragraph 37: "...the complete removal of pain has correctly been termed a pleasure. For example, when hunger and thirst are banished by food and drink, the mere fact of getting rid of uneasiness brings a resultant pleasure in its train. So generally, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place."

With regard to peace of mind, I understand it to be the absence of disturbance. Here I quote from number 79 of the *Vatican Sayings*: "He who has peace of mind disturbs neither himself nor another."

And as far as I know, disturbance, annoyance, and uneasiness are not different from one another. The removal of any of them will result in peace of mind, hence pleasure (Of course it is mental pleasure since peace of mind is a mental state). Still in paragraph 37 of Cicero's *On Ends*, Torquatus said "When we are released from pain, the mere sensation of complete emancipation and relief from uneasiness is in itself a source of gratification. But everything that causes gratification is a pleasure (just as everything that causes annoyance is a pain).

About my statement "...you are still wanting only when you have no limit to what you want."

What I am talking about here is that unlimited desire will not satisfy us. I based such statement from number 81 of the *Vatican Sayings*: "The soul neither rids itself of confusion nor gains a joy worthy of the name through the possession of supreme wealth, nor by the honor and admiration bestowed by crowds, nor through any of the other things sought by unlimited desire."

I have just mentioned that unlimited desire will not satisfy us because this is what I understand from number 68 of the *Vatican Sayings*: "Nothing is ever enough for someone who regards enough as insufficient."

About the limiting part, I am referring to the elimination of false idea of endless satisfaction through endless desire and wants. I understand it to be correct based on number 59 of the *Vatican Sayings*: "What cannot be satisfied is not a man's belly, as men think, but rather his false idea about the unending filling of his belly."

Nevertheless, I do not claim to be absolutely correct or accurate. I just rely so far on some pieces of the original works of Epicurus. You recommended that I read Norman DeWitts' book which you are probably using as an appropriate gauge to measure whether or not a particular comment on Epicurus is correct. This will make me further understand your observation and comments. But so far, this is what I understand based on the original works. I am starting to read DeWitt though.

Lastly, you mentioned "So I am thinking that some of the points could probably be tightened up to be more accurate to the Epicurean viewpoint (which I am presuming is your goal there)."

Yes. That is my goal. That is the reason why I strive to be as close as possible to what has been originally said by Epicurus himself. The problem is...it is also my goal to bring Epicurean philosophy to lay audience, and this effort will probably dilute the exactness of Epicurus' thought into ordinary words which may become quite general, vague, and shallow. It is a dilemma that I have to face at the expense of accuracy.

Post by "Cassius" of January 6, 2020 at 1:17 PM

Great discussion Mike thank you. We are not very far apart at all.

Where I am thinking that greater precision could be gained is an issue I have discussed with Elayne. Are pain and pleasure "cumulative" summaries of all feelings being perceived at a particular moment? What happens when (for example) your eye relays a scene that you find pleasurable, while at the same time your toe is hurting from an ingrown nail? The eye (or some other part of the body perceiving a sensation that is pleasurable) is relaying information simultaneously with the toe perceiving pain. Definitely both perceptions are different and we are talking about either pleasure OR pain, we fully agree that there can be only one or the other.

But i don't think that Epicurus' theory requires (or even allows) that we sum up our total perceptions into one sum that is either pleasurable or painful, and I think that would be required for the "only" parts of your statements to be valid.

Now, it might be arguable that you can only pay attention to one thing at one time, and that you will register that feeling at the instant that you direct your attention to the toe as painful, and then change your assessment in another instant as you direct your attention to your eye. Is that the position that you wish to argue, or that you think Epicurus was contemplating?

I am open to the idea that the mind can only be aware of one thing at a time, but that doesn't seem intuitively true to me, so I am not yet convinced that that is what Epicurus would have been thinking about. Summation of all feelings/perceptions into a sum, and saying that your consciousness can only feel pain or pleasure at a single instant, seems to me to cause problems (such as creating the kind of "mixed states" which he pretty clearly wanted to avoid). It may seem like i myself am the one advocating mixed states, but I am saying that i think Epicurus was talking at the perceptual level, and saying that a particular perception can only be painful OR pleasurable, rather than saying that we can't be aware of more than one thing at a single time. In fact that's exactly what I think is involved in viewing life as a "vessel" which contains discrete experiences of pain and pleasure, with the goal of eliminating from the vessel all experiences of pain and having the vessel be full of experiences of pleasure.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 1:26 PM

We can also say that the pleasure in the eyes while pain on the toe are happening at the same time, but the pleasure in the eyes can't be pain at the same time. My pleasure in my mouth can be pain in my stomach, but the pain in my stomach can't have any pleasure at the same time.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 2:14 PM

Right I am definitely with you there but would clarify, when you say this:

"My pleasure in my mouth can be pain in my stomach, but the pain in my stomach can't have any pleasure at the same time."

Do you mean that the pleasure in your mouth can *lead to* pain in your stomach? Otherwise I may not understand your point.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 2:22 PM

My point is I can have pleasure while eating and at the same time experiencing a crumbling stomach due to the fact that I am eating something delicious but harmful to my, let's say, stomach ulcer. However, it seems impossible that my stomach pain can become painless at the same time. Otherwise, it is no pain at all.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 2:45 PM

Ok you are talking about separate parts of the body and presumably then separate perceptions (1. pleasurable perception from the tongue / taste and 2. perception of pain from the stomach ulcer.

I too would think that both of those can be experienced simultaneously, but I suppose someone could say that the attention could focus on only one at a time.

Maybe the issue is whether for purposes of discussing pain and pleasure (applying computer analogies) human consciousness is single-threaded or multi-threaded (?) 😊

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 3:04 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Maybe the issue is whether for purposes of discussing pain and pleasure (applying computer analogies) human consciousness is single-threaded or multi-threaded (?) 😊

Computer algorithms are without a question multi-threaded. Human consciousness on the other hand is single-threaded. It is like our eyes which can only see whatever is before them. I guess there is a much more compelling thread to discuss, and that is the difference between pleasure and happiness. I guess they are two different things others think of Epicureans to speak of alternately. We can ask "Why should we pursue happiness?", but Torquatus expressed that there is no any other reason to ask why we should pursue pleasure because it is what nature simply necessitates.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 3:10 PM

[Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

Human consciousness on the other hand is single-threaded.

I am not necessarily disagreeing at this moment, but it is not self-evidently clear to me that this is correct. I would like to know what [Elli](#) and [Elayne](#) (and of course others too) think about this.

Mike if someone were to dispute you on that point what would you point to as authority or evidence?

And would saying that consciousness is single threaded mean that we cannot be aware of more than a single feeling of pleasure and pain at one time? Maybe discussing "single or multi-threaded" becomes a rabbit hole not to pursue, but i think the general issue probably ought to be made clear.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 6, 2020 at 3:22 PM

This brings to mind studies on multi-tasking. I've not read the studies, but summaries I've seen in articles from time to time generally state that we can only focus on one task at a time. Therefore "multi-tasking" is actually rapidly shifting attention back and forth from one task to another.

Similarly, a perception would include only pleasure or pain but as one's perceptions shift, so does one's experience of pleasure or pain. For instance, right now I've got the flu and generally feel pain. If I get engrossed in a good book I feel pleasure even though the pain of sickness is still there, I'm just not perceiving it.

Which brings also to mind the much more extreme example of Epicurus on his deathbed, where he was enjoying pleasurable memories even while dying a painful death.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 3:24 PM

[Cassius](#) Our sensation such as our eyes must not be discriminated from our consciousness. Here is the evidence I can use so far based on number 24 of the [Principal Doctrines](#): "If you reject absolutely any single sensation without stopping to discriminate with respect to that which awaits confirmation between matter of opinion and that which is already present, whether in sensation or in feelings or in any immediate perception of the mind, you will throw into confusion even the rest of your sensations by your groundless belief and so you will be rejecting the standard of truth altogether. If in your ideas based upon opinion you hastily affirm as true all that awaits confirmation as well as that which does not, you will not escape error, as you will be maintaining complete ambiguity whenever it is a case of judging between right and wrong opinion."

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 3:28 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

If I get engrossed in a good book I feel pleasure even though the pain of sickness is still there, I'm just not perceiving it.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Which brings also to mind the much more extreme example of Epicurus on his deathbed, where he was enjoying pleasurable memories even while dying a painful death.

These are both examples that I think I would use to suggest that different perceptions (one of pleasure and another of pain) can exist simultaneously and us be aware of both at the same time?

When you are sick Godfrey are you actually completely oblivious to how bad you feel when you read?

[Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

Our sensation such as our eyes must not be discriminated from our consciousness.

I guess this is ultimately the same question, but I am not sure that [PD24](#) answers the question. In fact does not [PD24](#) indicate that "you" are conscious of separately evaluating multiple perceptions at the same time?

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 3:41 PM

[Cassius](#) "Judging between right and wrong" is a clear indication of a single-threaded consciousness unlike computer algorithms which can make a million bits of judgment at the same time without singling out one problem at a time.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 3:51 PM

Not arguing Mike, but why does that example seem to be a clear indication to you? Maybe we have a different definition of single-threaded?

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 3:51 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1351-can-we-experience-pleasure-in-one-part-of-our-experience-and-pain-in-another-par/>

When two people are dictating to us two different stories at the same time, there is no way we can memorize all that has been said and have two sets of judgment right away at the same as well.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 6, 2020 at 4:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

When you are sick Godfrey are you actually completely oblivious to how bad you feel when you read?

Excellent question!

I just tried an experiment: I went outside and stood in the sun and watched my perceptions. I experienced the sensation of the sun's heat and the sensation of my sore throat simultaneously. In terms of the feelings of pleasure or pain, I experienced pleasure from the sun's heat, but only the sensation of the sore throat.

Another experiment: I've got a very stiff neck, which is more painful than my sore throat. I looked at a picture that brings me pleasure, then while continuing to look at the picture I turned my body into a very uncomfortable position for my neck. I still felt pleasure from looking at the picture, while I felt the sensation of a stiff neck. Continuing to move, I felt pain in my neck and just the sensation of the picture, without the pleasure.

Regarding reading, when I'm totally focused on reading I don't notice any pain, but often I'm in kind of a spacey midway point where I'm experiencing neither pleasure or pain.

What this suggests to me is that there's a subtle difference (which I can't put my finger on now in my spacey midway point) between sensations and feelings. Pleasure and pain are a response to sensations (and to anticipations and to thought) and it's possible to experience a sensation without experiencing noticeable pleasure or pain. If sensations are relatively mild, then feelings are only noticeable by the attention that we give to them. This can be misconstrued as a "neutral state".

Unfortunately I'm in a NyQuil haze so I'm not sure if I'm making any sense 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 4:37 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1351-can-we-experience-pleasure-in-one-part-of-our-experience-and-pain-in-another-par/>

Aside: Just so I personally don't get lost in our current discussion, I am reminding myself that this is where we started, with Mike's post on FB:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Mental pleasure exists only when you have peace of mind. Peace of mind exists only when you have no more fears and worries. Fears and worries exist only if you are still wanting. You are still wanting only when you have no limit in what you want."

I am still not sure that the "physical" question of whether we can experience pain and pleasure in different parts of our body at once is really the issue, although that will be interesting to continue discussing and possibly answer.

The original question was more like: "whether the uses of "only" in this set of propositions are an accurate restatement of Epicurean views" which I don't think is necessarily the same issue.

And I continue to think to myself that we need to keep in mind that (in my opinion) this entire issue came up first in context of a LOGICAL argument (the refutation of Plato's arguments in [Philebus](#)) rather than a "medical" or a "clinical" context. I suspect that is highly relevant to this discussion because I think the main focus is really on the logical point that nature gives us no faculty of choice other than pleasure or pain, very broadly considered as "feeling." And that would mean that the primary issue Epicurus was addressing was probably "feeling vs reason" or "feeling vs religion" and not "whether pleasure in toes can simultaneously exist with pain in fingers." Because if a third guide exists that would tell us how to regulate choices between pleasure and pain, then that guide would be more important than pleasure and would deserve the title "guide of life." In Epicurean terms reason and logic and wisdom and virtue and the rest cannot meet that test, because they are still simply tools for the attainment of the feeling of pleasure, so pleasure always remains in primary seat.

So I doubt Epicurus was concerned with the question of whether he was multi-threaded or single threaded in experiencing intense physical pain alongside intense mental pleasure on the last day of his life. He might say to us that whether he was experiencing them simultaneously, or flipping back and forth between them as his attention refocused, would not be important to the discussion. He might say that the only thing important to the discussion was that FEELING (not "reason" or religion or the rest) remained his guide to the last moment.

Post by "Cassius" of January 6, 2020 at 4:40 PM

Oscar:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1351-can-we-experience-pleasure-in-one-part-of-our-experience-and-pain-in-another-par/>

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

In terms of the feelings of pleasure or pain, I experienced pleasure from the sun's heat, but only the sensation of the sore throat.

Intuitively that makes sense to me, that you experience both. I am not sure that there is a workable distinction between sensations and feelings (or "experiences") but maybe that needs to be considered.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 6, 2020 at 6:55 PM

Still, as far as I can try to imagine, there is only either pain or pleasure. Bodily pain and mental pleasures may take place at the same time, but again, they are at different areas or state which can happen at one moment so it is easy to believe they happen at the same time. It's like saying my wife is in pain while I am at a pleasant state while we are hugging. I would probably be more convinced if were to experience a "painful painlessness" or a "painless pain." That would sound more Platonic in the sense that it is only present in the imagination and not in my body. I still can't imagine my stomach pain to be painless at the same time.

Post by “Elayne” of January 6, 2020 at 9:03 PM

Cassius, that last bit about it not mattering whether you are quickly task switching is what I was about to say. The way our brains work is to smooth out extremely rapid changes of attention so that it makes "sense"-- for instance, we think we are looking at a whole room at once when really our visual fields can't do that. Our brains fill in the rest. That's why the gorilla on the basketball court video tricks people, because their brains fill in the rest. If you read some of the neuroscience oddities, you run into bizarre things like baseball players seeing themselves hit the ball, which couldn't have happened until after-- but the brain re-orders the events.

Anyway not to get too far afield-- I doubt we can truly pay attention to two feelings at the exact same millisecond, but we switch back and forth much faster than we are capable of recognizing. So it might as well be simultaneous, for practical purposes. It doesn't change anything about what we decide.

Sensory input, however, does not require our conscious awareness to be used by the brain. Experienced drivers can get distracted and drive home, avoiding obstacles, without having paid any attention. The brain is constantly dealing with sensory input. The room temperature, for instance-- we can notice it, but even if we don't, our body's thermoregulation still takes air temperature into account.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 10:34 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Experienced drivers can get distracted and drive home, avoiding obstacles, without having paid any attention.

Great example. Some of my most helpful sessions listening and thinking about Epicurus have been driving while listening to podcasts, and when I get where I am going I hardly remember the drive.