

# Tranquility v Pleasure

**Post by “Godfrey” of February 22, 2020 at 4:59 PM**

In Diogenes Laertius section on Democritus, one of Democritus' opinions is stated as:

Quote

The end of action is tranquillity, which is not identical with pleasure, as some by a false interpretation have understood, but a state in which the soul continues calm and strong, undisturbed by any fear or superstition or any other emotion. This he calls well-being and many other names.

Epicurus taught the reverse. Is there anything in the literature that posits that Epicurus was reacting against this particular doctrine of Democritus? Regardless, this seems like a good statement of what Epicurean pleasure is *not*.

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**Post by “Godfrey” of February 22, 2020 at 6:11 PM**

In the same section DL says Democritus, in his travels, may have associated with the Gymnosophists in India (an ascetic sect). I'm wildly speculating here, but could it be that Demo developed an affinity for Eastern philosophies of the time, which Epicurus was equally responding against? I've read the occasional article on the cross-fertilization of Greek and India but have no idea as to the validity of any of this.

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**Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2020 at 7:04 PM**

Excellent questions Godfrey. I know it is commonly discussed that Epicurus diverged from Democritus on free will / the swerve, but this is a topic that I've read much less about.

I agree with the drift of your direction, but I'll have to pull out Diogenes Laertius to scrutinize that passage. Is it possible that the part you quoted is intended to only apply to "painful" emotion, or does it mean ALL emotion?

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## Post by “Godfrey” of February 23, 2020 at 11:36 AM

That quote was from the Hicks translation; here's the same quote from the Pamela Mensch version:

### Quote

The goal is tranquillity, which is not identical to pleasure, as some have mistakenly understood it to be, but a state in which the soul proceeds calmly and steadily, untroubled by any fear or superstition or any other emotion. This he calls well-being and gives it many other names.

This touches on the problems of fragments, context and translation. This is all there is on this subject in DL. Judging by these two versions "any other emotion" is the intent, not just painful emotions. But it's not much to go on.

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2020 at 12:20 PM

Right -- and I suppose that another ambiguity is the "untroubled." It might not be possible to say that a pleasant emotion is "troubling."

But regardless of that, it's not easy at all to square that with Diogenes Laertius saying that Epicurus held that "He [the wise man] will be more deeply moved by feelings, but this will not prove an obstacle to wisdom" so it does seem clear that Epicurus diverged significantly from Democritus on this.

I'm not sure what Democritus held on whether the soul could be eternal even in an atomistic world, but it seems clear that if you start with Epicurus' position that "For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation" from the letter to Menoecus. Presuming that we take "emotions" as being very closely related, and/or essential to, sensations, then it seems impossible to think that Epicurus would wind up with absence of emotion as being the goal of life or the definition of happiness.

I am sure that some people will try to go in the direction that this is explained by "ataraxia" which they hold to be some type of happiness totally divorced from sensation and normal emotions, but for reasons we discuss regularly that seems to me to be a very unpersuasive argument.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of February 23, 2020 at 3:00 PM**

Exactly. That's why this quote seems to me to be a useful counterpoint to the Epicurean position. Epicurus would say "the goal is pleasure, which is not identical to tranquility, as some have mistakenly understood it to be." And proceed from there to replace Democritus' description of tranquility with his own description of pleasure as we often discuss it.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2020 at 5:45 PM**

Yes exactly the same issue in play over the course of multiple philosophers, with the position opposite of Epicurus taken by Hieronymus:

[Are You Epicurean Or Hieronymian?](#)

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### **Post by “Hiram” of February 24, 2020 at 9:45 AM**

I don't remember the source but I remember reading that Nausiphanes and Epicurus once encountered Pyrrho, who had traveled to INDIA and met the gymnosophists (yogis) there.

Pyrrho's Buddhist influence has been the subject of books linking this to the Gandara Indo-Buddhist culture.

Either way, in this encounter Epicurus was so affected by Pyrrho's tranquil demeanor that he replaced Democritus' cheerfulness ideal with the ataraxia ideal. If Nausiphanes was with him, we have to assume that

1. Epicurus was young
2. He was still earning atomism from Nausiphanes and forming his own doctrines

However Epicurus rejected the skepticism of Pyrrho. His ataraxia did not come from not having opinions, but from having doctrines that were aligned with nature and abolished superstitious fears.

## Post by “Godfrey” of February 24, 2020 at 4:28 PM

Hiram, I find this DL quote interesting for a couple of reasons:

- 1) It states that tranquility (not cheerfulness) is the goal and opposes that to pleasure
- 2) By implication of this contrast and Democritus' exposure to the east, it potentially *contrasts* pleasure with Buddhism or similar philosophies.

However there's a lot to sort out, and this particular topic is new to me. Can you recommend any sources where I could pursue this further?

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## Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 24, 2020 at 9:35 PM

I'm beginning to lose my tranquility once again. 😞 If tranquility as a goal were true, another question is whether such tranquility is Buddhist tranquility which is based on minimalism or Taoist tranquility which is based on moderation. So the question would become: "Is Epicurus more Buddhist or Taoist?"

I don't know now whether Epicurus is minimalist or moderate. If none of them were true, I also couldn't imagine him to be an extreme hedonist like Aristippus. And if not any of them were true, who exactly is Epicurus then since he is not a minimalist, not a moderate, and not even an extreme hedonist? 😞

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2020 at 9:49 PM

### [Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

And if not any of them were true, who exactly is Epicurus then since he is not a minimalist, not a moderate, and not even an extreme hedonist?

I think he was someone who first and foremost knew that he had only one life to live, and that in a world in which there is no divine or ideal standard with which to comply, the best he or anyone else can do is to make the most out of life by experiencing as much pleasure, while at the same time experiencing as little "unnecessary" pain, as possible.

The trick seems to be that some people want to say that pain is so bad that it must be eliminated at all costs, including at the cost of pleasure. What is "necessary" in the estimation of one person is "unnecessary" in the estimation of another.

I think Epicurus was realistic in recognizing that a certain amount of pain is required in order to achieve pleasure. That calculation/estimate/feeling however is going to differ from individual to individual, as is the amount of pain involved in any particular activity. Some people are going to choose to accept less pleasure in order to suffer less pain, but some are going to deem that more pain is worth it if greater pleasure can be obtained, and the activities in which they choose to pursue and accept pain are going to differ too.

I am thinking that the real problem here is that people are looking for a "rule" that tells them how much pleasure is worth how much pain, and which activities they should choose to pursue. However it is the nature of an atomistic universe that such a rule does not and cannot exist.

Also, of the three terms you chose, I definitely do not believe that moderation or minimalism describes Epicurus. The problem with the third term, "extreme hedonism," is that the term "hedonism" is so polluted as to be unacceptable, but it is the closest of the three you gave. Part of the problem here too is that Epicurus' view is so foreign to us that we aren't used to describing in common words what we are talking about when we say that "pleasure" is the goal, even at the cost of some pain. Pleasure is an extremely wide term, covering every physical and mental experience in life, but we have been browbeaten into equating it with sex drugs and rock'n'roll so long that we are ashamed of the word, and that is a crime that has to be fought back against.

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## **Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 24, 2020 at 10:19 PM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Some people are going to choose to accept less pleasure in order to suffer less pain, but some are going to deem that more pain is worth it if greater pleasure can be obtained, and the activities in which they choose to pursue and accept pain are going to differ too.

Does it mean that there always has to be pain to achieve any type of pleasure?

### **Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2020 at 10:27 PM**

I don't think that's necessarily the case, but it often is. [Restated: It is not necessarily the case that all pleasure requires some pain, but it is often the case that achieving certain pleasures requires some amount of pain.]

Should I anticipate that you are thinking that pleasures which cost nothing in pain are somehow superior than those which require pain? I don't think that there is any reason to say that at all. There is no objective ranking of pleasures by any outside factor -- and i think that that is where DeWitt is going with his "Unity of pleasure" chapter.

There is no way to say absolutely that one pleasure is greater than another. The pleasure of smelling a rose has no objective sanction to be greater, or lesser, than the pleasure of standing on top of Mount Everest. In a universe in which there is no center or no creator telling us that a single perspective is the correct one, it is in the nature of things that every being gets to make its own estimation of what is, to it, the pleasures worth striving for.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2020 at 10:29 PM**

Also - if there WERE an "outside ranking" that would tell us how to rank pleasures, then the knowledge of that ranking system would supersede pleasure as the ultimate test. That is pretty much the trap that Plato set in "[Philebus](#)" -- because if you accept that premises that there is something outside of the generic term "pleasure" by which pleasure must be judged, then that outside standard becomes the rule of life.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of February 24, 2020 at 10:39 PM**

Lately I've been thinking that "we have a pleasure attraction/ pain aversion guidance system" might be less confusing than "pleasure is the goal" in the culture we currently inhabit.

As you (and Epicurus) frequently emphasize, Cassius, the details must be seen in the context of the overall philosophy. Wording similar to what I'm suggesting might help to remind one of that context.

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## Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 24, 2020 at 10:40 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

There is no way to say absolutely that one pleasure is greater than another. The pleasure of smelling a rose has no objective sanction to be greater, or lesser, than the pleasure of standing on top of Mount Everest.

Therefore, it is wrong to use the phrases "greater pleasure" or "greatest pleasure" for they do not exist?

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2020 at 11:37 PM

### [Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

Therefore, it is wrong to use the phrases "greater pleasure" or "greatest pleasure" for they do not exist?

No, clearly from the individual subjective perspective some pleasures ARE greater than others. What is incorrect is to imply that the gradation from lesser to greater are the same for everyone - it clearly is not.

I realize that my answers seem so flatly stated that I must come across like Moses handing down tablets from Mt. Sinai. But really, isn't all this very obvious? I think the problem is what Godfrey is referencing, but in more stark terms:

"Pleasure" has been so demonized that we are afraid to use the term. I do agree that it is more accurate to saying something like "feeling" so as to encompass both pleasure and pain in the analysis, but I think we all see the issue.

This was being pointed out to me earlier today in regard to some of the presentations at the recent Athens symposium -- the word PLEASURE is almost never used. And that's a pattern we see repeated in so many different presentations.

We have been browbeaten into submission, but I see no way back but to charge directly into the center lines of the opposition and start explaining the heart of the matter, rather than continuing to run from it,

I am all in favor of explaining things in terms that people can understand, and maybe at times that means first being diplomatic. But if we never get around to stating the heart of the issue; if our diplomacy never gets to the point of clarity, then we are wasting our time.

And I personally am more aware of that every day. Every day I get older, and I see how much time has been wasted dancing around the real issue - -which is what we are discussing here now.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 24, 2020 at 11:43 PM**

Godfrey and Mike, we three here in this conversation are wrestling with the same issue, I think.

One thing I can add to the conversation as a result of having been involved in discussing this for close to ten years now is this:

It never seems to get easier to confront this, but it does get HARDER. As time goes by, everyone who is initially drawn to the picture that Epicurus painted have to confront the issue of whether they are willing to charge forward under the real issue (the feeling of pleasure) or whether to water it down with "happiness" or "ataraxia."

What I can tell you is that so many people who confront this issue end up falling away. They get tired; they just can't face the implication of being clear on this issue -- because it means being almost alone against the multitudes in academia AND religion. They burn up or burn out, stop fighting, and drift away.

I don't think it is possible to move forward in Epicurean thinking without being "faithful" to Epicurus on this point. I think it explains the downfall of the ancient Epicureans (much more so than the rise of Christianity) that the later Epicureans weren't able to keep Epicurus' focus on this key central issue.

This ("the feeling of pleasure") is the hill to die on for anyone who is really convinced that Epicurean philosophy is something special.

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### **Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 25, 2020 at 1:57 AM**

Quote from Cassius

No, clearly from the individual subjective perspective some pleasures ARE greater than others. What is incorrect is to imply that the gradation from lesser to greater are the same for everyone - it clearly is not.

I realize that my answers seem so flatly stated that I must come across like Moses handing down tablets from Mt. Sinai.

Ok Cassius. This one is clearer. Thanks.

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## Post by “Hiram” of February 25, 2020 at 8:40 AM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Hiram, I find this DL quote interesting for a couple of reasons:

1) It states that tranquility (not cheerfulness) is the goal and opposes that to pleasure

However there's a lot to sort out, and this particular topic is new to me. Can you recommend any sources where I could pursue this further?

I do not think ataraxia is opposed to pleasure. Diogenes Of Oenoanda explains that when the perturbations leave the mind, pleasure can enter. A-Taraxia means no-perturbations. So Epicurean ataraxia is linked to the process of healing the mind so that we may experience greater pleasure, or to use the Lucretius parable of the broken jar, ataraxia helps fix the cracks in the jar of the mind so that it may receive pleasures.

<https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2017/03/25/dio...-the-pleasures/>

Here is the fragment:

Let us now [investigate] how life is to be made pleasant for us both in states and in actions.

Let us first discuss states, keeping an eye on the point that, **when the emotions which disturb the soul are removed, those which produce pleasure enter into it to take their place.**

Well, what are the disturbing emotions? [They are] fears —of the gods, of death, and of [pains]— and, besides [these], desires that [outrun] the limits fixed by nature. **These are the roots of all evils, and, [unless] we cut them off, [a multitude] of evils will grow [upon] us**

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## Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 25, 2020 at 10:30 AM

[Hiram](#) I remember there was a thread where I quoted Torquatus that pleasure is the removal of pain, and there is no state between pleasure and pain. If ataraxia is not opposed to pleasure, is it pleasure? Is it the removal of pain? For stoics, ataraxia is not the removal of pain but numbness. The pain is simply not felt, but it exists.

And if ataraxia is the removal of pain, it also means pleasure. And if ataraxia and pleasure are the same, why is there a need for these two words to exist across Epicurean texts? Why not use only either pleasure or ataraxia alone?

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## Post by “Elayne” of February 25, 2020 at 1:27 PM

Mike, the most coherent explanation is that ataraxia is not itself a full description of a state-- it is merely the absence of disturbing conditions, fears, and the like, which would impede pleasure. And yes, if there's no pain, there's pleasure, for sure!

What has happened is that modern understandings of the word tranquility, instead of "without disturbance", imply a very passive state of muted pleasure, so people have gotten confused and think that's the goal.

There is no such thing as too much pleasure, because then it would be pain, at the moment it is felt to be "too much"... a person will have fluctuating energy levels and intensity levels that will suit them best. Less than that intensity will leave them searching for more, due to remaining pain, and too much intensity of a stimulus will be painful, causing them to back away. It's not a balancing act of pleasure-- it's finding the maximum pleasure point in the action that we want.

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## Post by “Hiram” of February 25, 2020 at 1:37 PM

[Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

[Hiram](#) I remember there was a thread where I quoted Torquatus that pleasure is the removal of pain, and there is no state between pleasure and pain. If ataraxia is not opposed to pleasure, is it pleasure? Is it the removal of pain? For stoics, ataraxia is not the removal of pain but numbness. The pain is simply not felt, but it exists.

And if ataraxia is the removal of pain, it also means pleasure. And if ataraxia and pleasure are the same, why is there a need for these two words to exist across Epicurean texts? Why not use only either pleasure or ataraxia alone?

Numbness is APATHEIA. Apathy. This is a Stoic ideal.

Ataraxia isn't numb, it means no-perturbations, and if we follow Epicurus' logic that all sentience is either pleasurable or painful, ataraxia would be pleasurable.

I think the reason why Epicurus used ataraxia is because he was arguing that we can not experience pure pleasure for as long as we experience perturbations like fear of death or of the gods, or unlimited desires. So one of the existential and psychological tasks of an Epicurean is to remove these.

(Julien de la Mettrie adds unwarranted remorse to the list of perturbations we should remove--in other words, feeling religious guilt for things that we should have no guilt about)

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## Post by "Cassius" of February 25, 2020 at 1:48 PM

### [Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

I remember there was a thread where I quoted Torquatus that pleasure is the removal of pain, and there is no state between pleasure and pain.

I agree with what Elayne said, and would say this too:

In order to avoid confusion I think it is necessary to back up to decide what it is we are talking about - which is "feeling" - which is an experience (on pleasure and pain as experiences I would refer to the Wentham article.

We can discuss the question of how long a feeling continues to exist, but as for me, I do not think that the word "state" is particularly useful, because there is no bright line between a feeling of pleasure that lasts for a second or a minute or an hour or whatever period of time.

As to there being only two feelings, pleasure and pain, the most direct statement on that which I have found is in Diogenes Laertius:

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The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined. Of investigations some concern actual things, others mere words. This is a brief summary of the division of their philosophy and their views on the criterion of truth."

And so I don't think it is good terminology necessarily to say that there is something "between" pleasure and pain as much as it would to say something like "all feelings are either pleasurable or painful" which makes the point that there are no other types of feeling that don't fit under one of the two labels.

Remember the basic point that "[Death is nothing to us](#), for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and *that which lacks sensation is nothing to us*" so anything that is not felt/experienced as pleasure or pain is "nothing to us" - which would cover anything that anyone wants to allege is neither painful or pleasurable to us.

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## Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 25, 2020 at 4:41 PM

### [Quote from Elayne](#)

There is no such thing as too much pleasure, because then it would be pain, at the moment it is felt to be "too much"... a person will have fluctuating energy levels and intensity levels that will suit them best. Less than that intensity will leave them searching for more, due to remaining pain,

[Elayne](#) Thanks a lot. This is a crystal-clear explanation which finally removes my confusion. I see.

### [Quote from Hiram](#)

Numbness is APATHEIA. Apathy. This is a Stoic ideal.

Ataraxia isn't numb, it means no-perturbations, and if we follow Epicurus' logic that all sentience is either pleasurable or painful, ataraxia would be pleasurable.

Ok. That answers my question whether or not ataraxia is pleasure.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

And so I don't think it is good terminology necessarily to say that there is something "between" pleasure and pain as much as it would to say something like "all feelings are either pleasurable or painful" which makes the point that there are no other types of feeling that don't fit under one of the two labels.

Yes Cassius. This is already clear to me. That's actually how I understand it as I used to quote Torquatus about it.