

# An Exchange with Haris Dimitriadis on Pleasure vs Ataraxia

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

(Posted on [FB on 5/5/20](#))



## Haris Dimitriadis:

Epicurus seems to identify pleasure with ataraxia (freedom from disturbance and anxiety) in the soul and freedom from pain in the body and consequently to claim that it is equivalent to say that the end of life is pleasure or ataraxia and aponia. This approach brought a lot of confusion to his followers, like me, and raised intense objections by his opponents since one could have peace of mind more easily by following an ascetic life rather than a pleasant life. I felt that there is a sperm of truth in these objections to Epicurus and I also used to be uncomfortable with

treating the notion of ataraxia as the norm of a happy life. Thinking about this issue, accidentally, an idea crossed my mind and I would appreciate your comments on that. Well, what I come here to suggest is that ataraxia and pleasure are related notions but they are not identical. This is obvious for the reason that pleasure is a feeling and ataraxia is a state of the mind.

The feeling is a result of the state of the mind but it is not the state of the mind. Their relation is that of the cause and effect. The right interpretation is to say that the maximum pleasure occurs when our minds are free from disturbance. The end is the maximization of pleasure and ataraxia is the state of the mind when this end occurs. What, I suggest, in short, is that it is wrong to say that both pleasure and ataraxia are the ends of life. Instead, it is right to say that the end of life is the maximization of pleasure (and the simultaneous minimization of pain) and that the maximum (peak) of this feeling is brought about when I find my mind free of worries, that is when I have no desires unfulfilled.

This may seem a negligible issue but I think it solves many of the controversies surrounding our philosophy and opens new perspectives in our lives.

**RW:**

Thanks for putting forward the discussion point, here's my contribution.

Epicurus in 'On Choice and Avoidance', as recorded by Diogenes Laertius:

'Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest' - this was my state of mind when reflecting upon the bounty from the garden.

'Joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity' - this was my state of mind during the months it took to nurture the plants.

**Haris:**

Yes, but peace of mind and freedom from pain are not pleasure at all. They are not emotions. Neither in action nor in rest.

**Elli:**

Please, dear my fellow men, be careful of the duration of this "rest" since there is the probability of a danger to become as apathy and lethargy. 😊

**Cassius:**

Haris: When you say "This is obvious for the reason that pleasure is a feeling and ataraxia is a state of the mind. The feeling is a result of the state of the mind but it is not the state of the mind."

In your second sentence do you really mean the reverse? "The state of mind is a result of the feeling, but is not the feeling."

Is not pleasure, the feeling, the primary and driving force of Nature, while "ataraxia" is something (a concept or name invented by men, such as "happiness" or "eudaemonia") that can be used simply as a convenience as a description of the result of filling the experience of the person with pleasures, to a maximum, such that all remaining pain is driven out from that person's experience?

I think that my question is stating what you are saying here, and with this I fully agree:

"What, I suggest, in short, is that it is wrong to say that both pleasure and ataraxia are the ends of life. Instead, it is right to say that the end of life is the maximization of pleasure (and the simultaneous minimization of pain) and that the maximum (peak) of this feeling is brought about when I find my mind free of worries, that is when I have no desires unfulfilled."

And I do not believe this to be a negligible issue at all, but a very good description of the reason we spin our wheels and rarely get traction in advancing the philosophy to new people, because we are hopelessly caught up in a conceptual abstraction (ataraxia, eudaemonia, happiness) when we should always have been following Epicurus strictly and been focusing on the pursuit

of the feeling of pleasure, with all these derivative terms clearly identified as derivatives, not the primary driving issue, on which Epicurus was always very clear:

that since there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, the precise way of describing the goal of living at any particular moment is always the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain, not the achievement of conceptual ideas which are constructs of the human mind that we use only for convenience ("ataraxia", "eudaemonia," "happiness")

**Haris:**

I do agree Cassius that is a huge issue that undermines the very essence of our philosophy. Who would show an interest in a philosophy that sets as purpose of life tranquility and painlessness. The next question to such a position would be, and then what. I have of peace of mind and so what do I do next. After 15 years of studying and writing on Epicurus I am confused as to what I should pursue first in my life: tranquility or pleasure.

The problem is that Epicurus himself in his letter to Menoeceus raised this dispute by equating pleasure to ataraxia and we should put things in order.

**Elayne:**

Haris!!! That is almost exactly what we have been saying here, but with a slight difference that I think will help you-- absence of pain is not a description of pleasure. There is only pain or pleasure, no true neutral feeling, just like only atoms or void. Ataraxia and aponia are without pains of mind and body-- but those words themselves do not describe anything-- like "without void" doesn't describe matter, even though where void is absent, there is matter.

If I say I am atheist, it doesn't tell you what I do believe.

I think part of this is that in modern times, we think of tranquility as a feeling. But the original word just means the absence of disturbance-- absence of pain.

When we understand that, the letter to Menoeceus is perfectly clear. There is no conflict in the philosophy at all. Our goal is definitely pleasure!

What an exciting thing to wake up and read your post!!!

This issue you raise is why I rolled my eyes at the modern version of this philosophy at first. I had come to a partial version of the actual philosophy on my own, and I thought Epicurus was a tranquilist. But that was because I was reading about him from authors who didn't understand him. When I read the core texts, I realized-- aha! This man was about pleasure! He figured it out!

This is so extremely important-- it is why we have been harping on it again and again. Unless the philosophy is understood this way, it doesn't even hold together-- it would be internally incoherent. But once you see this part, everything works perfectly.

**Haris:**

Thank you Elayne, it is great pleasure to read your post. I fully agree with you. The reason I raised this issue is that it is the main objection to Epicurus raised even from the time of the Cyrenaics, Cicero and the contemporary philosophers. I thought, it must be something serious for so many great minds to disagree with it. Remember that some had resembled the Epicurean life as the life of a corpse. Indeed, peace of mind is a very vague expression. It reminds the Buddhist nirvana, the Christian asceticism, not to mention, idleness, laziness and so forth. If we all agree on the true Epicurean telos then we should work collectively to clear things out.

**Elayne:**

Well, isn't that what enemies do-- create straw men to fight? All these opponents of Epicurus couldn't argue against his philosophy, because it was solid. So they made up a fake version and argued against that. And then woe to us, now so-called Epicureans are taking up the fake version and promoting it! But we have been fighting that here and on Cassius' page.

**Cassius:**

Haris as to "The problem is that Epicurus himself in his letter to Menoecus raised this dispute by equating pleasure to ataraxia and we should put things in order." The best explanation that I have been able to identify is that these passages by Epicurus were intended to address the "limit" argument most notably put forward by Plato in [Philebus](#), where he argued that pleasure cannot be the good because pleasure allegedly has no limit. The use of these limited passages to justify the argument that pleasure EQUALS "absence of pain" in every respect is in my view a gross misinterpretation never intended by Epicurus, nor possible when the rest of his views are taken into account, especially when considering PD3, which makes clear that the relationship between pleasure and absence of pain is the relationship of "limit of QUANTITY..."

I have summarized my references on this point in the essay linked below. More important than that, however, if you have not read them I highly recommend the articles by Boris [Nikolsky](#) ("Epicurus on Pleasure") and the Epicurus chapter in Gosling and Taylor's "Greeks on Pleasure." Those are linked in the article and are excellent because they help us with the academically-respectable analysis of the history of this argument that comes to the same conclusion that we have - that the majority consensus is very wrong.

<https://epicurusmagazine.com/the-full-cup-f...cassius-amicus/>

**Haris:**

Yes, I agree that a letter is not the proper place to explain a philosophy and for reasons of limited space and time one has to use shortcuts and generalizations. Unfortunately we do not have a full book written by Epicurus and he have to make guesses and most commonly to make misinterpretations.

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## Post by “Cassius” of May 5, 2020 at 4:34 PM

Additional Exchanges:

### Jason Logsdon:

Pleasure is not the end goal of life or Epicurism.

Pleasure is rarely both natural and necessary.

Epicureanism is not enjoying a good meal, it is satisfaction with a full belly.

If along the way you get to enjoy a good meal now and again, that is a bonus.

But don't make the mistake of thinking you need a good meal to have a good life.

Epicureanism distilled what is needed for a good life to the minimum of what is natural and necessary.

It cultivates an appreciation for the basics rather than an indulgence in the extra.

Epicureanism isn't about enjoying this cup of coffee, it's appreciating the shelter I enjoy this morning.

Ataraxia is that state, free from worry, because all your needs are met.

Ataraxia is necessary, pleasure is bonus.

### Elli Pensa:



**Jason Logsdon:**

Elli Pensa That doesn't counter anything I said.

**Elli Pensa:**

Jason Logsdon What do you said ? "Pleasure is not the end goal of life or Epicurism"!

**Cassius Amicus:**

The Martin Ferguson Smith translation of that is:

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end.

Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point.

[http://www.english.enoanda.cat/the\\_inscription.html](http://www.english.enoanda.cat/the_inscription.html)

**Elli Pensa:**

Jason Logsdon The fact is not of what you said. The fact is what Nature says. And the Natures' order is that without the pleasure of your parents you wouldn't even exist. 😄

**Jason Logsdon:**

Elli Pensa Epicurus defined pleasure in a specific way.

The issue is people confusing colloquial pleasure with Epicurean pleasure.

Since Epicurus didn't mean what we mean when he said a greek word that was translated as pleasure, maybe pleasure is not the right word to use.

**Elli Pensa:**

Jason Logsdon The fact is that Epicurus did not define... Epicurus first he lived and then he described what he had lived. 😊

### **Elayne Coulter:**

Jason Logsdon, this is a friendly reminder to reread our group guidelines and our document Not NeoEpicurean but Epicurean. In our files section. It is ok to ask questions, and of course you are not required to agree with our position. But our group rules are that you must not promote the NeoEpicurean view. There are other places you can do that. We have a specific mission here to spread the real philosophy. It's not a debate platform. We are outnumbered right now-- the academics have gotten people mixed up. So we are trying to present a clear alternative. Again, it's ok to question-- but persistent arguing is not ok with us. I hope you understand. ☐

### **Cassius Amicus:**

Jason's summary is an excellent example of how some people reach 100% opposite conclusions about the philosophy of Epicurus. When you start with a presumption that despite what Epicurus said, pleasure is NOT the end goal of life, then you can reach the most weird conclusions.

In contrast to what Jason wrote there are many totally opposite statements in the texts, both by Epicurus himself and by many other reputable sources, such as Cicero's "On Ends":

"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."

The only way you end up with the position Jason is articulating is to take out of context a few passages, which as Haris brought up APPEAR to say something different, and ignore the great bulk of the rest of the philosophy. The result stands Epicurus on his head.

I am sure Jason's comments are made sincerely, and they in fact reflect what is probably the majority view in Academia -- but in deference to our readers we don't let this line of argument go on indefinitely. At this point his post serves as a good reminder of what we are up against.

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### **Cassius Amicus:**

Our moderating standards evolve with circumstance, but readers here can be pretty sure that advocating positions like "Pleasure is not the end goal of life or Epicurism" are not consistent with the purpose of or participation in this group - at least for very long.

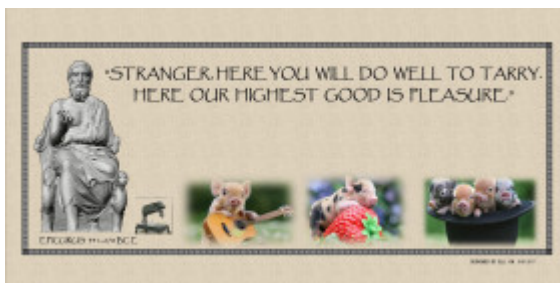
### **Elli Pensa:**

Epicurism and Apicursim!

### **Cassius Amicus:**

Also, readers here in the group who get confused about this issue can always refer to the banner at the top, which reminds us that over the Garden reputedly hung the maxim: "Here our highest good is pleasure."

Of course that is if we believe Seneca, which is prudent when he is consistent with Epicurus, but he goes off on his own Stoic way....



**Elli Pensa:**

Cassius Amicus Seneca young, Seneca old and look at Seneca how he felt when he died. Not in the same way as he was young.

ES 48. We must try to make the end of the journey better than the beginning, as long as we are journeying; but when we come to the end, we must be pleasant and content.

2

**Cassius Amicus:**

Further from On Ends:

"If then a life full of pain is the thing most to be avoided, it follows that to live in pain is the highest evil; and this position implies that a life of pleasure is the ultimate good. "

...

"Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the Telos, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the Chief Good is to live agreeably."

**Cassius Amicus:**

It would be interesting to hear what sources in the texts (rather than assertions) Jason would cite in support of his position for statements like:

"Pleasure is not the end goal of life or Epicurism."

"Pleasure is rarely both natural and necessary."

"Ataraxia is necessary, pleasure is bonus."

I think we can anticipate what he might cite, but it would still be interesting to confirm how he would deal with the references we have included above.

**Jason Logsdon:**

The problem is how Epicurus defined pleasure.

Epicurus' pleasure is not the same as the colloquial English pleasure.

It means something very specific.

"By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul." ~ Epicurus

OP said pleasure isn't Ataraxia and Epicurus clearly said it was, so it seems the issue lies with people's understanding of what pleasure is.

Towards that end it is better not to use the English word at all because Epicurus never did.

**Cassius Amicus:**

Jason do you have any other references to support your position other than that particular passage from the letter to Menoecus? I presume you realize how many other statements there are from Epicurus and others to the effect that Pleasure as ordinarily understood is the goal. How do you reconcile what appears to be an obvious contradiction between them? You simply take the position that the one sentence supercedes everything else?

One of many:

"It is observed too that in his treatise "On the Ethical End" he writes in these terms : "I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form."

- Diogenes Laertius, Book X

1

**Jason Logsdon:**

Cassius Amicus - "... a man never gets any good from sexual passion, and he is fortunate if he does not receive harm." ~Epicurus, Vatican sayings

**Cassius Amicus:**

Yes that one is on point, but if interpreted the way you are doing it would fly in the face about Epicurus' statements about sex being part of how he recognizes the good. In that one, I think the key to the analysis is in the "passion" part and the context that the young man being addressed (in other fragments anyway) was obviously pursuing that pleasure in such a way as to cause himself great harm. That doesn't change the fact that pleasure is "the good" but it just points out that if you don't pursue pleasure correctly you end up in great pain. That version is totally consistent with the big picture.

### **Cassius Amicus:**

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."



This particular phrase that exists in the above passage made me to create this graphic. 😊

### **Cassius Amicus:**

Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, III.20.46: For he has not only used the term pleasure, but stated clearly what he meant by it. "Taste," he says, "and embraces and spectacles and music and the shapes of objects fitted to give a pleasant impression to the eyes."

Cicero, On Ends II.3.7 (Torquatus to Cicero): "Does not Epicurus recognize pleasure in your sense?" (Cicero): "Not always," said I, "now and then, I admit, he recognizes it only too fully, for

he solemnly avows that he cannot even understand what good there can be or where it can be found, apart from that which is derived from food and drink, the delight of the ears, and the grosser forms of gratification. Do I misrepresent his words?" Ibid., II.7.20: In a number of passages where he is commending that real pleasure which all of us call by the same name, he goes so far as to say that he cannot even imagine any Good that is not connected with pleasure of the kind intended by Aristippus. Such is the language that he uses in the lecture dealing solely with the topic of the Chief Good. II.8.23: Men of taste and refinement, with first-rate chefs... the accompaniment of dramatic performances and their usual sequel – these are pleasures without which Epicurus, as he loudly proclaims, does not know what Good is. II.10.29: But fancy his failing to see how strong a proof it is that the sort of pleasure, without which he declares he has no idea at all what Good means (and he defines it in detail as the pleasure of the palate, of the ears, and subjoins the other kinds of pleasure, which cannot be specified without an apology). I.10.30: the kinetic sort of pleasure ... he extols it so much that he tells us he is incapable even of imagining what other good there can be. II.20:64: ... Nor did he forgo those other indulgences in the absence of which Epicurus declares that he cannot understand what good is."

### **Cassius Amicus:**

Just a few more, less well known:

Varro, On Philosophy, by way of Saint Augustine, City of God, XIX.1:

"There are four things that men naturally seek, without a master and without the support of any instruction, without effort and without any art of living ... naturally, they seek pleasure, which is an agreeable activity of physical perception, or repose, the state in which the individual suffers no bodily discomfort, or both of these (which Epicurus calls by the single name of pleasure), or taking everything together, the primary wants of nature..."

Athenaeus, Deipnosophists, XII p. 546E: {Aristippus and his followers were not alone} in welcoming kinetic pleasure ... Epicurus and his followers did the same. And not to enter on account of his "tempests" and his "transportations," all of which Epicurus cites many times, also the "titillations" and "stimulations" ...

Antiochus of Ascalon, by way of Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies II.21 p. 178.43: For of those that are ruled by pleasure are the Cyrenaics and Epicurus; for these expressly said that to live pleasantly was the chief end, and that pleasure was the only perfect good. Epicurus also says that the removal of pain is pleasure.

Plutarch, On Peace of Mind, 2 p. 465F (Johannes Stobaeus, Anthology, 29.79): For this reason not even Epicurus believes that men who are eager for honor and glory should lead an inactive life, but that they should fulfill their natures by engaging in politics and entering public life, on

the ground that, because of their natural dispositions, they are more likely to be disturbed and harmed by inactivity if they do not obtain what they desire.

### **Holly June Graves:**

Great quotations! I'm not sure that I've come across them before.

### **Jason Logsdon:**

If there is any ambiguity on what is good. Epicurus provided a heuristic.

“Of our desires some are natural and necessary, others are natural but not necessary; and others are neither natural nor necessary, but are due to groundless opinion.” ~ Epicurus, Vatican sayings

The desired goal of Epicureanism is to do what is both natural and necessary.

If you can place a pleasure in both categories you are good.

If a pleasure only fit one of those categories, as I think most colloquial English pleasures do then...

It is good when you can get it, but not life defining.

“Question each of your desires: “What will happen to me if that which this desire seeks is achieved, and what if it is not?”

“[Pleasure] is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of merrymaking, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest disturbances take possession of the soul.”

“The soul neither rids itself of disturbance nor gains a worthwhile joy through the possession of greatest wealth, nor by the honor and admiration bestowed by the crowd, or through any of the other things sought by unlimited desire.”

“It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly. And it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living a pleasant life.”

“He who is not satisfied with a little, is satisfied with nothing.”

“Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not.”

"If thou will make a man happy, add not unto his riches but take away from his desires."

"It is better for you to be free of fear lying upon a pallet, than to have a golden couch and a rich table and be full of trouble."

"There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance."

### **Cassius Amicus:**

Jason: "The desired goal of Epicureanism is to do what is both natural and necessary." Your statement there does not follow from the text that Epicurus was writing. He set forth the categories, yes, but that does not contradict his other statements that all pleasure is desirable because it is pleasure.

And everything else you quoted fits into the same paradigm - Epicurus gives us general observations that are helpful in thinking about the problem, but the ultimate question always resolves back to the ultimate issue of pleasure being the only thing desirable in life.

As Torquatus explains in On Ends:

" One kind he classified as both natural and necessary, a second as natural without being necessary, and a third as neither natural nor necessary; the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered."

The PRINCIPLE OF THE CLASSIFICATION is that some pleasures are easier to obtain, at a less cost in pain, than others, but that does not mean that any pleasure is displeasing in itself, nor does it mandate that we only pursue pleasures that produce the least pain.

The issue always come back to "pleasure" being the greatest good, and as pleasure is a feeling, and not a Platonic category, then it is up to the individual to decide what the greatest pleasure to him or her will be under their individual circumstances.

The classification principle is nothing but a tool of analysis, and there is no "approved list" that says that any particular pleasure is always to be chosen or always to be avoided.

As Torquatus summarized:

"If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure."

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"If then the doctrine I have set forth is clearer and more luminous than daylight itself; if it is derived entirely from Nature's source; if my whole discourse relies throughout for confirmation on the unbiased and unimpeachable evidence of the senses; if lisping infants, nay even dumb animals, prompted by Nature's teaching, almost find voice to proclaim that there is no welfare but pleasure, no hardship but pain—and their judgment in these matters is neither sophisticated nor biased—ought we not to feel the greatest gratitude to him who caught this utterance of Nature's voice, and grasped its import so firmly and so fully that he has guided all sane-minded men into the paths of peace and happiness, calmness and repose?"

3

### **Cassius Amicus:**

And Jason since I am sure you will wish to argue based on the letter to Menoeceus, as that is the standard way of arguing your point, I will point out:

(1) That Epicurus has previously pointed out in the letter that "all good... consists in sensation, of which the desirable sensation is pleasure. ("For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation.")

(2) That Epicurus has previously said, using the example of FOOD, that "And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant." Now you may want to argue that "absence of pain" whatever that means, is the most pleasant thing in life, but most normal people do not argue that, and I am not going to accept the assertion that Epicurus was not a normal person with normal human sensations."

(3) As to this sentence: "For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure." This is simply a statement that we no longer need ADDITIONAL pleasure once our experience is full of pleasure. Nothing could be more simple or obvious.

(4) "And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life." - Which fully speaks for itself.

(5) "For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard

by which we judge every good." Which is absolutely unmistakeable. The FEELING is the standard, not the absence of a feeling.

(6) "And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided." And this is the heart and the reason behind the natural and necessary analysis - so that pleasure can be maximized.

### **Cassius Amicus:**

And all of this takes place in the context recorded by Diogenes Laertius that Epicurus held "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. "

The fact that there are only two feelings ("internal sensations") establishes the quantitative relationship that the presence of one within our experience exactly equals the "absence" of the other. This is a logical deduction that establishes how each relate to the limit of experience in total, but in no way does this link mean that "absence of pain" is an adequate description in words of pleasure, any more than "absence of pleasure" is an adequate description in words of pain.

### **Samuel Álvarez Rodríguez:**

Interesting discussion! Would it be fair to say that Epicurus would have also seen a problem in someone who, falling short of experiencing full-pleasure, felt nonetheless satisfied in its sub-optimal state? Or would this be, by his definitions, an oxymoron since you would only feel satisfied when in a state full of pleasure?

I guess I'm wondering whether he'd be *\*against\** some sort of tranquilism, as less than "optimal" in terms of pleasure. I find it easy to imagine a state in which the lack of, say, sexual desire prevents you from having the motivation to seek great sexual pleasure (even ones that cause little or no future pain, such as in an a self-induced orgasm), and yet you feel completely at peace.

I hope this makes sense. Thanks in advance!

**Cassius Amicus:**

Samuel I think you are correct. Stating the goal as that which is most desired is not going to mean that you should not work to approach it as well as you can, while being realistic that some pains in life cannot be removed depending on circumstances. Epicurus himself was apparently plagued with bodily infirmities when he was an adult, and he died after a long period of being in pain from what appear to be kidney stones. The fact that he did not obtain perfect relief from pain during those periods did not negate the identification of the best state as one which is filled completely with pleasure and from which pain is eliminated.

Certainly many people find themselves in situations plagued with pains, bodily and mental, where they find that the most important thing to them under those circumstances is to relieve those specific bodily pains.

What Epicurus was doing as a philosopher was pointing out reality of Nature, and that Nature provides pain and pleasure to guide living things, and that assertions of supernatural gods and idealistic goals based on logic, and divorced from nature, are perversions of the natural path.

When you compare Epicurus' writings to what Plato and Aristotle and others had asserted it is pretty easy to see that Epicurus was talking about the "big picture" that derives from the nature of things in general. Gods and Platonic ideals such as "virtue" do not exist in themselves, and are creatures of human minds. What does exist as a primary connection with reality, given us by Nature, is pleasure and pain. The big picture is that we all seek to maximize pleasure, and minimize pain, but only someone in an ivory tower would think that the goal is an insult to the reality of how well you as an individual person can achieve in your own circumstances. Epicurus lays out the facts of reality and it's up to us to do the best we can with reality.

That's why this issue is so intense: Nature sets out the feeling of pleasure as the "divine guide of life" (Lucretius' term) while religions and other philosophers turn nature's guidance on its head and suggest that "pain" should be our focus - and they attempt to use word games to drain the word "pleasure" of all the natural content that anyone feels it to possess.

Epicurus didn't do the draining - it's the Stoics worst of all, using Platonic word games, such as alleging that "absence of pain" is a full and complete definition of pleasure, which is something Epicurus clearly never meant to convey, even though certain of his words - taken out of context - can appear to lead in that direction. It's up to us to be intelligent enough to see the big picture and that that interpretation is incorrect at best and intentionally corrupting at worst.

3

**Jason Logsdon:**

Cassius So you're going to try to Gish Gallop me then? Did you have fun arguing with yourself?

I am arguing that what we think of as pleasure isn't exactly what Epicurus meant, as he says explicitly what pleasure is and what it is not.

He may not be an exhaustive list but it provides a good guide.

I don't deny that sensation is a part of pleasure. I am arguing that some sensation are better than others as laid out by Epicurus.

Comfort is a pleasure of sensation. The comforts of necessity are the core of Epicurean goals; protection from the elements, a full belly, companionship, free of irrational fears. All pleasurable. When your basic needs are met you can achieve Ataraxia, no worries. Satisfaction and gratitude with those basic pleasures of sensation are the highest ideal. That is all that is required for a good life, but that does not mean you should limit yourself only to what is required. Epicureanism is not asceticism. The other pleasures are still desirable and should be enjoyed when available and prudent but are not required for a good life. You should get a tasty meal we you can, but if you're not happy because you can't get a tasty meal all the time, that is not Epicureanism.

#### **Cassius Amicus:**

Samuel specifically as to: "Would it be fair to say that Epicurus would have also seen a problem in someone who, falling short of experiencing full-pleasure, felt nonetheless satisfied in its sub-optimal state?" If you are saying that someone consciously identifies that he could experience more pleasure, but consciously decides NOT to choose that additional pleasure for no reason other than "complacency" -- Yes I do think that anyone who realizes that life is short, and that life is our only chance to experience pleasure before an eternity of death, would "have a problem" with such an analysis, from this perspective:

What a terrible waste such a situation would be!

Of course that doesn't mean a person acting from Epicurus' perspective would seek to "force" that person to do more: Epicurus was not an advocate of "the greatest good for the greatest number," so I don't think epicurus would necessarily intervene. But your question implies that the person chose to avoid pleasure for some reason other than the cost in pain it might take to obtain it, and consciously limiting yourself to less pain for no reason would be such a waste.

#### **Cassius Amicus:**

Here is a large part of Jason's problem: " I am arguing that some sensation are better than others as laid out by Epicurus. "

Nowhere in any text does Epicurus allege that "some sensations are BETTER than others." Epicurus said the opposite - that ALL pleasure is desirable, and that the question of choices and avoidances is only in the cost in pain that might be required to obtain some pleasures.

There is no "Better" pleasure or "worse" pleasure because the distinguishing feature of pleasure is only that we feel it to be pleasurable. Same with pain. Pleasure and pain are the ONLY guides given by nature on which to base choices and avoidances.

Assertions that there are outside standards by which pleasure can be ranked ("better" or "worse" - or why not go ahead and use the Stoic "noble" or "worthy" or even "true" or "false") is totally outside the Epicurean analysis. It is Platonism or worse, and not something Epicurus, and acceptance of any standard other than pleasure itself destroys the foundation of the philosophy, just as Plato led [Philebus](#) into accepting in his dialog of the same name.

As an example of the correct argument: "10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life."

The ONLY reason we have any issue with "profligacy" is that in real life "profligacy" usually produces much offsetting pain as an eventual consequence, and is not in real life productive of a life of pleasure.

#### **Cassius Amicus:**

To follow up, it is those who assert that they themselves know the answer - for everyone - to what is "natural" and "necessary" in life, are the ones who think that they know what is "better" or "worse" or "worthy" or "unworthy."

Epicurus never does that himself, because he is consistent - Nature gives all living things only the feeling of pleasure as the guide, and it is up to each of them - and each of us - to follow pleasure and pain as best we can. That is a total rejection of Platonic/Stoic/Aristotelian idealism.

#### **Jason Logsdon:**

Well this is the point were we will have to agree to disagree.

#### **Charles Edwins:**

Jason Logsdon - I see no reason for our conduct on this page to specifically include and intend on utilizing multiple distinctions of "pleasure" when we are very clear about pleasure and

Epicurean Philosophy. I find that debating the merits of certain pleasures and sensations over each other to the point of ad nauseam pointless, when the point should always remain: "pleasure is the goal of life".

Indeed the whole argument of what is deemed natural or necessary is a broad category but Neo-Epicureans constantly get lost while trying to cement consistent, and unmistakable pleasures while simultaneously championing some over others.

You quote the letter to Menoeceus and I will do the same.

"And again independence of desire we think a great good — not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it, and that all that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard." - LtM (Cyril Bailey translation)

I agree with you in the sense that EP is not asceticism nor is it full on cyrenaic-hedonism and that we should appreciate the basics, but only if we do not have the extras.

I however, do not agree that ataraxia is necessary, or at the very least when the language used contradicts Epicurus. Epicurus favored "pleasure" and wrote at length about "pleasure" and his words cited by Torquatus, Cicero, and Laertius contradict certain aspects of the Letter to Menoeceus if you extrapolate too much from that letter without getting a much larger picture from other sources.

The Epicureans maintained that all pleasures were desired \*because\* they are pleasing, on top of Epicurus' quotes within the PD and other sources like the VS that say that pleasure is good and pain is evil/bad. To say that not all pleasures are to be chosen or that some pleasures are better than others out of some categorization of whats natural or necessitated doesn't make sense.

Things like friendship are extremely pleasing as are marriages, yet both of these relationships are still bound by the pleasure derived from them. This is why Epicurus says the wise man will marry according to the circumstances in their life, for it is prudent to marry or select relationships when it is most pleasurable and unlikely to end in bitter pain.

As for a conclusion, the only deterrent to some pleasures are their resultant pain, but that pain in no way reduces that initial desire's pleasure to begin with, otherwise they would cease to be desired in the first place. What is natural and necessary for you may be much different to myself or everyone else in this group, so we must apply our hedonic calculus, or as Epicurus put it the virtue of prudence in application (which is heavily inspired by Arete & Anniceris of Cyrene).

## Elli Pensa

"And again self-sufficiency (and NOT independence of desire), we think a great good." Another thing is self-sufficiency and another thing is the independence of desires. 😊

Elli Pensa Since "self-sufficiency" includes and maintain that Great Desire to share all the pleasures that you've already achieved, with your next others. 😊

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## Post by “Eikadistes” of May 5, 2020 at 8:33 PM

Recently, I've come to think of this like the weather forecast:

Is a "good day" a day that *isn't rainy*? Or is a "good day" a day that is *positively sunny*?

... and what's the difference, anyway?

Is Partly Cloudy not also Partly Sunny?

Similarly, does not the absence of pain and suffering indicate the presence of pleasure? I think it must.

There's definitely a danger of mistaking "ethical egoism" or "ethical hedonism" as being quiescent and withdrawn due to the implication that anything defined as "ethical" is necessarily reminiscent of a meditating Buddha, or a passive guru, or a stoic priest. I think this is what leads people to automatically assume that Epicurus wanted "painlessness" rather than "pleasure-fulness", or why he'd prefer "a sky without clouds" rather than a "sunny day". Not because there is any physical difference, but because they are afraid of embracing pleasure, and use the first one as a euphemism for what's really going on.

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## Post by “Cassius” of May 5, 2020 at 8:57 PM

Yes Nate I think you're right.

It's kind of like the glass half-full or half-empty issue. We can look at the same words and choose to see what we "want" to see, or what we "expect" to see, because we're looking at something that is an either/or between two sets of opposites.

Either way of labeling the glass is ok, because it is accurate as to quantity of liquid and quantity of air, but the problem comes when we read into the situation implications that are not there when simply looking at the quantity.

WE are the ones who load the observation as to quantity with the additional meaning of "Which way is trending?" in using full and empty.

And so in the issue of pleasure and pain, WE are the ones who are choosing whether to look at the issue from one that emphasizes pleasure or emphasizes pain.

The choice tells a lot more about us than it does about the ultimate conclusion toward which Epicurus was leading, which he made clear in many other statements.

And that's why I am still convinced that a large part of the key to unwinding this is to refer to PD3 where the words "limit of quantity" tell us that what is being discussed is not equivalence of pain and pleasure in every respect, but instead, what's being discussed is a logical point as to limits, which was made necessary by the Platonic argument that pleasure cannot be the good because it has no limit.