

# Pleasure: ruminations from sequestration

Post by "Godfrey" of May 5, 2020 at 4:39 PM

From Google:

PLEASURE: a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment.

HAPPY: feeling or showing pleasure or contentment.

I like the circularity of these two definitions. It seems accurate to me.

TRANQUILITY: calm.

Tranquility is something valuable for an Epicurean to strive for. However it is a tool, not a goal. Tranquility allows access to subtleties of sensation, prolepses and feelings, which can lead one to greater wisdom.

MEANING

*"They say also that there are two ideas of happiness, complete happiness, such as belongs to a god, which admits of no increase, and the happiness which is concerned with the addition and subtraction of pleasures."* Sayings About the Wise Man, Bailey translation

What exactly is godlike happiness and how does a person achieve it? Could it be that "meaningful" pleasures and "general" pleasures are two types of pleasure equal to these two types of happiness in the above quote? I think that we've determined pretty conclusively that pleasure is pleasure. But lately I've been trying to dig deeper into how best to pursue pleasure as my primary goal, and I'm noticing that some pleasures fill my cup fuller than others and that these pleasures seem to involve what I see as meaning. For me, this is a sense of understanding and connection, sometimes to the "big picture." I realized this as I was pondering why some of the things that have motivated me in the past are no longer of interest. Comparing these past pursuits to current interests, the link seemed to be that the strongest desires and pleasures came from activities that gave/give me meaning. This seems pretty obvious. It's also obvious that each person has things which are meaningful specifically to them, so meaning is not a prescription but something to find for oneself, using the Canon, and to act on using the Canon as well.

Part of where this is coming from is my recent condensed reading of Plato's Republic. I was thinking about how the Physics of Epicurus has evolved into the predominantly accepted version of science, while the Canon and Ethics have largely disappeared from the general culture. Why? In propagating "noble lies," Forms and other nonsense, religions and Platonists

stole meaning from reality and marginalized any reality-based philosophy. So to compete with religion and Platonism, we need to take back meaning and place it where it belongs, which is in reality and hence in Epicurean philosophy.

This emphatically does NOT imply that there is a universal meaning: that is incompatible with EP. This refers to the meanings proposed by science, by psychology, by Victor Frankl and others who realized that meaning is individual. I'm suggesting that Epicurus recognized this, and that a major reason why his philosophy thrived for so long and so widely is that it gave people a means and a context in which to find and pursue lives of meaning on their own terms.

As a proselytizing tool, "individually meaningful pleasure" might be more compelling than "pleasure."

At the point of individually choosing which desires to prioritize is where it seems helpful to distinguish between meaningful and general pleasures. Beyond that, pleasure is only measured by the fullness of the cup.

Would this be considered higher and lower pleasures? Is that valid? Does meaning usurp pleasure as the goal in this interpretation? Would pleasures of meaning be natural and necessary pleasures as opposed to vain pleasures? No, because vain pleasures/desires cause more pain than pleasure; "general" ones don't necessarily. Isn't that distinction higher and lower pleasures? But higher and lower is determined by the individual their circumstances, not as a universal.

Caring for a parent or spouse with Alzheimer's is a duty, not a pleasure. It can involve random moments of pleasure. It can also involve love and connection, which give it meaningful pleasure. Is this meaningful pleasure a higher or more godlike pleasure than the random moments of pleasure?

---

## **Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2020 at 4:48 PM**

I want to think further about this but my preliminary thought is that what you're talking about is not something that ends up being "higher" or "lower" but something that gives measurement to the "intensity" of the pleasure.

I know Elayne has discussed this before and "intensity" and "duration" both fall short of being full descriptions of what we are talking about, but clearly pleasures, while all sharing the same nature as being felt as pleasure, do differ from one another in important respects in terms of how we feel them.

This is a deep subject that we haven't really addressed, and although I certainly see where you are going with "meaningful" I suspect that's also going to fall well short of an accurate description. And i am not sure that "meaningful" may not even be less useful or descriptive than "intensity' and "duration" - it is almost as if the word "meaningful" is kind of circular.

Probably this also is relevant to one of the more difficult PD's, but apparently one of such importance that it was in the "top ten":

**9. If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted, and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another.**

We rarely talk about it because it seems so difficult to be sure what it means, but I bet it relates to this discussion.

Edit: Also, in order to avoid violating the rule that Pleasure is the highest good, we can't really have a standard outside of pleasure by which we judge pleasure; it seems like any word we look for has to be an attribute of pleasure itself (eg, duration, intensity.....) because otherwise if the issue is some outside standard ("meaning"?) then the goal of life must then be expressed as "meaning" which obviously blows a hole in the side of the logical analysis.

---

### **Post by “Don” of May 5, 2020 at 8:08 PM**

The [Epicurus Wiki has an interesting commentary on KD9](#).

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of May 5, 2020 at 9:09 PM**

Thanks for thank Eugenios. This is probably also what is covered in DeWitt's "unity of pleasure" discussions, but I find the entire discussion by virtually everyone to be unsatisfying.

As that wiki entry points out, there really is even lingering doubt as to whether the point is that pleasures **cannot** be so condensed, or is in fact a hypothetical asking us to imagine that they **can** be condensed and therefore asking us to think about what that tells us about the particular pleasures.

I could read that to mean that he is saying that pleasures differ ONLY in "intensity," and that he is arguing that the pleasure of cutting your fingernails differs from the pleasure of listening to a symphony only in "intensity" -- which apparently is a way of looking at how much of the total experience of the organism is taken up by that particular experience.

If that were the point, then this would be another way of emphasizing that there is simply no "outside" standard (outside of pleasure itself) by which to judge or rank pleasures. And that would be consistent I think with the thrust of several other positions Epicurus seems to take.

It would also join up with what I think is going on in PD3 and much of the rest of the "limit" analysis, which I think involves looking at life as the "sum total of experience" and thinking about how individual pleasures and pains are added to the vessel to come up with the sum of whatever is in the vessel at a particular moment.

However the point the wiki derives seems to be 'his belief that the various [pleasures](#) are in an important sense independent' which would be a very different point, if true.

Eugenios and others - what do you think? Is the emphasis that "the various pleasures are 'independent'" or something else?

I think I end up as usual thinking that dewitt is correct with a "unity of pleasure" approach, but I have not read that section recently enough to recall if I am remembering it correctly.

---

### **Post by “Godfrey” of May 6, 2020 at 3:21 PM**

Speaking from experience and not from the sources, I'm finding "intensity" to be an unsatisfying description from a practical perspective, although probably a good description from a theoretical perspective.

Theoretically, pleasure as a faculty is unified. Organisms are biologically guided by attraction to pleasure and avoidance of pain; intensity of total pleasure is what is important for this faculty.

But we are thinking organisms whose thinking often interferes with the pursuit of pleasure. So on a practical level, for guidance in choices and avoidances to live a good and pleasurable life, I think more nuance is needed. We do have natural and necessary v vain pleasures for a starting point for choice and avoidance but, at least to my thinking now, that doesn't go far enough.

That's why I brought up "meaning" for discussion, but that seems problematic particularly because it can so easily be associated with universal principals.

In thinking about my past pleasures, the ones that are the most gratifying often have more than one "layer" to them. For instance studying Epicurus: there's the "layer" of enjoying reading, one of pondering, one of connection to Western history and culture, one of discussing in this forum 😊, one of putting the ideas into practice, one of perceiving the alignment of theory and practice, etc. Also there are physical and mental pleasures. So in terms of planning and choosing pleasures, one pleasure might be very intense on just one level whereas another might be more satisfying because it stimulates several levels but perhaps with less intensity on each level. Think of scanning old family photographs and the various "levels" of pleasure involved: organizing a mess, looking at pictures, observing history, connection to family, sharing the results....

Also regarding practical "choice and avoidance" decisions, duration is a factor.

Isn't this type of practical discussion something that would have gone on in the garden?

If we're to be connoisseurs of pleasure we really need to examine the nuances of the pursuit of pleasure in addition to the theory. Maybe we could learn from each other by examining various pleasures from experience. This could give us information to examine our own pleasures as well as the theory.

---

### **Post by "Pompadour" of May 13, 2020 at 8:55 AM**

Godfrey (by the way, that is what I named my dog, gone now for about 3 years) from a practical perspective do you find it useful to track your experiences of pleasure in a log or diary for reflection later? Does that aid in thinking about different intensity of pleasure or analyzing your criteria?

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of May 13, 2020 at 9:26 AM**

I somehow seem to have missed Godfrey's post of May 6. I don't know that we really grappled with Eugenios' original point, but I am now gathering we are talking about how to describe the attributes of what we mean by "pleasure."

We have used or seen used words like "intensity" or "meaning" and "duration" and perhaps "purity" and potentially applicable adjectives. We also have the word "condensed" which as far as I am concerned in English is virtually devoid of meaning, or is so ambiguous that it's almost

useless, so we need to discuss what that means.

We know that pleasure and pain apply to not only immediate bodily functions (eating, etc) but also to mental functions. However as we've recently seen in discussing comments from Konstan, it might be important to consider that "emotions" can be pleasurable and painful but are not themselves the same as pleasure and pain.

And of course the word "happiness" is floating out there with little consensus as to how it should be used in talking about a life of pleasure.

"Net" pleasure may be in the ballpark but seems hopelessly underpowered to bring all the factors together.

Maybe it would be helpful to come up with some **diagrams** or graphics that would help us identify what we are talking about?

---

### **Post by “Godfrey” of May 13, 2020 at 1:38 PM**

Pompadour, sorry to hear of Godfrey's demise. We lost our dog last year and it's tough to lose someone who loves and depends on you.

I'm not organized enough to keep a log or diary of my pleasures (or of anything, for that matter). Like many things, that might be useful or pleasurable depending on your personality or specific circumstances. Some people keep a gratitude journal (I've tried 🙄) and that could be a good model for such an endeavor. Since gratitude is closely related to pleasure, the two might be combined into one log or journal. I could also see where this could be useful on a short term basis: to get through a difficult time, or to help navigate a transition.

Personally, the best way that I've found to reflect on and analyze pleasure is to assume a comfortable supine position in a quiet place, give my thoughts a direction, and watch where they go. But I'm sure that that's not effective for everybody! In terms of putting my thoughts to paper (analog or digital) I tend from time to time to make checklists of general or specific pleasures to pursue. Over time these help me to refine my thinking about ways to use my feelings for guidance.

Cassius when you mentioned diagrams, that got me thinking about intensity in terms of depth and breadth. Depth would correspond to adding "layers" such as in the caregiver example above. Maybe breadth could represent intensity; I'm not so sure about that one. Also intensity could be represented by various colors. Depth and breadth seem to relate to the full cup analogy more so than color....