

Post At Modern Epicurean Blog - "Epicurean Ethics Considered And Defended"

Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2020 at 10:33 AM

I consider this article linked and attached here to worth reading as a step in the right direction - but one for which many more steps are needed. It's another effort to wrestle with the "absence of pain" issue, and I think it ends up much closer to the right place than most do, but I would go much further. Here is an edited version of my comments to the blogger, which I think are best placed here before the article is linked:

The article is an analysis of work by Toby Sherman, who writes (and these are not the words of the writer of the blog) "*This is because kinetic pleasures gain their value from their ability to reduce our sum of pain.*" Put another way, kinetic pleasure is "remedial" and takes its "value...in the removal of what is bad."

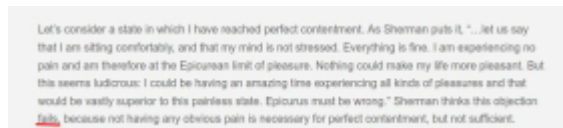
I would call this almost "offensive" to me -- or better stated it just shows the kind of attitude that I have no sympathy with. Kinetic pleasures do not "gain their value from their ability to reduce our sum of pain." All pleasure is desirable in and of itself, and not for consequences relating to displacing of pain. PLEASURE is the motivating force of life, darn it, not running from pain! And I am not sure there is any bridge-building possible or desirable between people who see the world based purely on running from pain. For the thousandth time, if you really want to eliminate pain from life, there is one sure method for achieving that! The holding of "running from pain" as the meaning of life is the true "stoic" mentality, it seems to me, and I believe that the proper response to that is to recoil from it like recoiling at a snake - and then be prepared to strike back at it and eliminate it from your mind as a legitimate perspective on life.

And for Sherman to say that that it is possible to construct a "plausible" interpretation of Epicurus' views. How ridiculous - Epicurus' views of pleasure - when read as a whole and not through the modern commentators - are very clear for anyone who doesn't have that stoic run-from-pain mindset!

Of course I know there are many people who are exactly that way, and I feel very sorry for them, but we cannot allow them to monopolize Epicurus and keep "the truth" away from people who have a normal and healthy view of life, who not only need it just as much, but have the capability of understanding it and using it.

It looks like Sherman gets around to the Gosling and Taylor common sense understanding of the issue as a "full tank of positive pleasures of all kind" but it's painful to go through all the apologizing and stoicizing first.

Here's a clip:



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My problem here is that the objection does not just "fail" -- it is absurd, ridiculous, offensive, and numerous other action adjectives, and it should be treated as such. I would perhaps make a small exception for the example of a doctor in a hospital full of homicidal maniacs who take such a position, and for such a doctor it might be suicide to enlighten them as to their mania. And so such a doctor might well hold his tongue or even agree with the maniacs to their face in order to escape from them. Which, come to think of it, is an approximately accurate description of most of the academic world today, so maybe I should cut Sherman some slack.

"The Stoic account (and, of course, the Epicurean) places the control of desire at the centre of happiness." << I would not say that is accurate as to Epicureans. Yes desires are to be understood and pursued intelligently, but not "at the center" or as a goal in itself, as the Stoics seem to do. And the type of control and other aspects of the "control" issue are hugely different.

"Sherman says that any example which tries to prove that pleasure can be increased beyond perfect painlessness can be argued to show that the person experiencing said pleasure has yet to reach perfect Epicurean contentment." <<< My issue with that passage is that "contentment" is very misleading in the current age. It sounds like in most ears as the equivalent of sleep - doing absolutely nothing - and if you're working on making this into a practical philosophy, you probably should avoid a word that has so much negative baggage and inaccuracy. As long as we focus on tranquility and contentment and words like that, we'll never capture the core direction.

I think the whole issue at stake here is answered in this from On Ends:

*"The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which *****will not admit of further improvement.***"***

The "will not admit of further improvement" is the full and complete answer to the problem that Sherman will never solve by calling this state "contentment."

THIS is the sentence that people need to focus on and embrace: " Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?"

OK with that intro, here is the article, with a copy attached here too:
<http://www.themodernepicurean.com/2020/09/06/epi...d-and-defended/>

Post by "Godfrey" of September 7, 2020 at 3:09 PM

I read that blog post last night, so I'm writing from memory. My overall impression was "favorably mixed." I had actually saved it to read again but haven't done so yet.

I agree with the points you make [Cassius](#) . For me, the positives were that he (Sherman, I think) was able to explain what he got right in very clear terms. Relating to the blog quote (and Cicero quote), I liked when he continued from that point to an explanation of why most of us aren't experiencing the limit of pleasure: the niggling, everyday doubts, worries, concerns that we barely notice. I think this is a very important point, and I don't even mind that he expresses it in terms of the absence of pain. Since the feelings are pleasure *and* pain, it's important in *living* EP that we are sensitive to both feelings. Personally I think we're so conditioned to thinking there's a neutral state that we don't even notice these "discomforts;" at least that was my experience as I began studying EP (and still is, to a lesser degree). So this is where I think he's heading in the right direction: he seems to be starting his thesis with absence of pain but then reeling that back towards a more complete understanding.

Maybe this is how one has to approach it in academia; as you say, it's a step in the right direction. 🙄

Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2020 at 3:20 PM

At the moment he seems more inclined to engage me privately for a while so I am not sure he will post back. If he doesn't post publicly, I'll post some edited versions of our discussion either

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1684-post-at-modern-epicurean-blog-epicurean-ethics-considered-and-defended/>

here or somewhere else.

Post by “JCRAGO” of September 8, 2020 at 2:03 PM

Hi all 😊

I'm happy to engage in a public discussion of my blog post.

But in order to do so, I need to know what it is exactly that Cassius finds offensive about Sherman's thesis. Cassius says that the Epicurean goal is a state which will not admit of further improvement, but this is precisely what Sherman is defending -- in Sherman's own words, a state of which a person could say that there is "*nothing at all about my situation that I would want to change.*" Sherman challenges the reader to imagine being in such a state--a state of perfect painlessness/contentment--and says that when they do, they will realise that Epicurus was right to consider this state the upper limit of pleasure we can experience.

It seems to me Cassius' main gripe is a stylistic one, not a philosophical one.

Post by “Godfrey” of September 8, 2020 at 4:52 PM

Obviously I can't speak for Cassius, but do have some comments of my own....

I enjoyed your blog post and I think Sherman had some excellent observations regarding a state that won't allow further improvement. Personally, what made his observations so potent for me was that in reading them I was able to feel a state of complete pleasure. For me, this was beyond contentment, it was joyful. But to a large degree I think we are trying to describe the same thing. Going with that assumption, why call the goal pleasure instead of absence of pain?

When I set a goal for myself, I put it in positive terms. Likewise, in my mind the highest goal of my life should be positive, not something that I want to avoid. I'm going to think in terms of striving for good health, not avoiding getting cancer, heart disease, dementia and on and on. There's the example of "don't think about the monkeys" and then all you can think about is monkeys. So to state a highest philosophical goal in negative terms seems to be selling the philosophy short.

Another drawback, to me, of "absence of pain" is a tendency to confuse it with some sort of Zen state. As a former Zen practitioner, I see one of the beauties of Epicurean philosophy as an extremely nuanced examination of pleasure and pain on a personal level. (Actually, as one advances in Zen practice, there is examination of various states of body and mind: the "Zen state" is something of a stereotype.) The stereotypical Zen state (or whatever one prefers to call it) is actually more of a neutral state. For Epicurus, pleasure and pain are binary: there is no neutral state. Again speaking personally, I think we as a society have become desensitized to the niggling little pains and it becomes quite easy to confuse a state of contentment for a state of pleasure. Having said this, this is solved by personally developing one's sensitivity to one's feelings more than nomenclature. But I think that pursuing pleasure leads to opening to the feelings, while avoiding pain leads to a tendency to dull the feelings. The entire basis of the Canon is opening up to sensations, prolepses and feelings, so anything that leads to dulling any of these faculties is counterproductive in terms of pursuing the philosophy.

Stating the goal as pleasure has another advantage of being thought provoking, much more so than absence of pain. Once one is pursuing the philosophy it's thought provoking in a good way in that I think it's more effective in getting one to understand the nuance than is the pursuit of absence of pain, for the reason of opening to the feelings as I described above.

Lastly, to put *some* words in Cassius' mouth, I think he sees "absence of pain" as an attempt by critics of Epicurean pleasure to equate Epicurus' philosophy with that of the Stoics and others. If so, this is a gross misrepresentation of the philosophy by said critics.

Post by "JCRAGO" of September 8, 2020 at 5:54 PM

I think the disagreement stems from mostly semantical/rhetorical confusion and a failure to more 'expansively' conceive of painlessness as positively pleasurable. (Understanding how terms are specifically defined is crucial). The way I will be conceiving of painlessness moving forward is to ask whether I would like to change anything about situation. If not, then I am at the limit of pleasure. It's that simple really, no need for a long debate.

Also, I am not apologizing for Platonists/Stoics or propping up a negative instead of a positive. I am positively declaring that pleasure is the end of life and that the greatest pleasure is painlessness.

Post by "Cassius" of September 8, 2020 at 6:10 PM

Here's my extended reply, and I am glad that Jordan restated his assertion that "the greatest pleasure is painlessness" because that's exactly the rhetorical form I reject most emphatically. He posted that while I was preparing this:

Let me rearrange and edit some of the comments that Jordan and I have had in private conversation about this. Jordan's view is that Sherman says that the total absence of pain is the absolute most pleasure you could possibly feel, and hence the importance of removing pain. You pointed out that if the idea that painlessness is the greatest amount of pleasure you can feel sounds counter-intuitive, then, in Sherman's words, that's a failure of imagination

My view of all of this is that rather than failure of imagination, dwelling on "absence of pain" as a complete definition of the best life amounts to giving in to a stoic suppression of emotion" argument.

If "pleasure" is the guide of life, as Epicurus clearly held, why not state that forcefully and clearly and not leave it for imagination? Why dance around the issue?

But let me be clear, I think Epicurus DID state that forcefully and clearly, and that the error is in those who want to seize onto a limited part of the discussion and elevate that limited aspect into the full and complete goal, which it was never intended to be.

Epicurus said that clarify is essential, so I think the manner of speaking is very important, especially when a crusade against "pleasure as the goal" is exactly what Stoics and Platonists and Religionists do every time they mention Epicurus.

So why talk incessantly in the enemies' terms? Why try to assuage our enemies' concerns and sensibilities at the expense of clarity, while our own lives and the lives of those we value is so short?

Again, I don't think Epicurus was guilty of lack of clarity. What Epicurus was "guilty" of, if anything, was failing to anticipate that people in the ages after him would totally forget the context in which he worked, and ignore the fact that in Epicurus' day, there were important arguments made by prior philosophers against holding pleasure to be the guide of life which demanded to be addressed.

Jordan you state at the beginning of your article that "...I'm interested in Epicureanism as a practical philosophy for modern living - a kind of secular replacement for my lost religion." I very much agree that that is a good goal, and because it is a good goal, not just for you but for a very wide number of people, the replacement needs to worded in terms that are clear, and focused on the true motivating principle. It's not practical or efficient for most people to set their sights around things that are less than the very most important. That very most important question is most frequently discussed as "What is THE goal of human life?" That question demands to be answered first and most clearly, rather than chasing tangents which might be helpful to deflect opposing arguments, but nevertheless remain tangential to the central issue

of what we should in fact focus our attention on pursuing.

And in setting out that goal, in answering that question about what is THE goal of human life, giving the answer as "painlessness" is just about the most DE-motivating and DE-pressing answer that I can imagine. And in case it's not clear why it's demotivating and depressing to practical people, practical people know that the only way to reach true painlessness is through suicide - since "death" is the only guarantee we have for the end of pain. Now I know that you object to that formulation, and we'll have to agree to disagree, but I am comfortable that reasonable people who aren't tripped up by word games realize that the only practical way to completely avoid pain is to end our lives, and that's not a reasonable formulation of why life is worth living.

It certainly sounds like from the record that Epicurus faced this same question of identifying the central goal, and that he came up with "Pleasure" as the answer. I think it's safe to say that that's why Torquatus is recorded to have said: "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."

You seem to advocate that our primary aim in life should be to eliminate pain, because you think that that is the way to bring about the greatest pleasure. I do not agree at all that Epicurus saw that as his message. I think he saw his message as "pleasure" as that word is ordinarily understood, to be achieved as he recommended through associating with friends, through all the pleasurable activities of food and dance and music and art and all the innumerable pleasing activities that are part of life, including all aspects of the study of nature, and the intelligent application of physics, epistemology, and ethics.

I think Epicurus also gained great pleasure from the combating of error in the world around him, and that's in large part why we have the Principle Doctrines organized as they are, rather than as a set of positive instructions on how to prepare food, and manage property, and make love, and all the other assorted ways to gain pleasures. Epicurus was a fighter, and a teacher, and a doctor, so he chose in the list of Principle Doctrines to combat false ideas by giving easy-to-remember antidotes. He addressed the false views of gods in PD1 and gave the answer that gods by nature do not cause troubles. He addressed the false ideas about death through PD2, by giving the answer that all troubles come through sensation, and death is the end of sensation and therefore of all troubles. And he addressed the false ideas of the Platonists who contended that pleasure cannot be the goal of life, because it has no limit, in PD3, by pointing out that the logical limit of pleasure is when ALL of our life's experiences are full of pleasures rather than of pains. There's nothing mystical or counter-intuitive in PD3, or in the letter to Menoeceus in the parts you are thinking of, because all they do is establish that pleasure has a limit and therefore pleasure can logically qualify as the goal of life. In my view, people who take your position are mistaking a logical argument for an ultimate practical expression of how to spend your time. You don't do that in regard to PD1 about gods or PD2 about death, and you

shouldn't do it in regard to PD3 about pleasure either.

The great weight of the records of Epicurus's teachings all revolve around a very common-sense viewpoint that Pleasure is to be pursued and pain to be avoided. That's why Torquatus' summary quoted above is the best and clearest statement of the positive goal.

You've said to me in the past that "the way to ultimate pleasure is the removal of pain." It seems to me that I've seen those kind of formulations regularly in writings about Epicurus on the internet, and that sounds like it's advocating some painlessness as some special kind of pleasure, which I don't see at all. That's the subject of Elayne's article referring to "Fancy Pleasure" [here on Epicureanfiends](#). As I see it, pleasure means pleasure as ordinary people understand it, and Epicurus' references to painlessness are nothing more than references to ordinary pleasures unaccompanied by any mixture of pain.

I think you'll likely conclude that we're really talking just terminology or semantics, but I think it is a huge hurdle to convince a normal and reasonable person that "painlessness" is an acceptable definition of the goal of life. Moreover, I don't think there's any reason to even consider trying to do that, because the goal is easily describable in ordinary words, as did Torquatus: " Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?"

That's why I strongly resist embracing the terminology of "absence of pain" or "painlessness" as anything other than in a very limited technical context, suitable for discussing logical arguments with well-educated philosophy students, but absolutely *unsuitable* as a practical guide for living. To me, when you set off with your goal defined as avoiding something, you'll never intelligently find your way to where you want to be, which is a life spent with the maximum number of pleasures while experiencing the least number of avoidable pains consistent with the attainment of those pleasures.

Again, the way most people in my experience function best is to positively identify what their goal is, and go after that goal. By nature and by consequence they end up avoiding the other things which are not their goal, and thereby they arrive at their life of pleasure with minimum pain. If they simply blind themselves to positive goal-setting and say simply "I want to avoid pain" then in my view they will never necessarily end up anywhere. Were they rigorously logical they would choose death as the most effective way to avoid pain, just as Epicurus suggested in his letter to Menoeceus, but that's more of a joke to healthy people than a serious hazard, because setting "avoiding pain" as a logical goal simply makes no sense to normal people.

But on that point, "avoiding pain" is not a joke to people who are hurting with any of the numerous kinds of depression that are so common today. It's relatively easy for us to joke and say that "painlessness" is our goal, because we who (we hope) are relatively healthy can wink and nod and realize that what we are saying has no practical content, and go on about our way pursuing pleasure rather than worrying about pain hiding under every bed. But we get lots of people interested in Epicurus who come to us in less-than-optimum mental condition, and if they hear that "painlessness" is the goal of life, then such people are apt to take that argument in exactly the wrong kind of direction to make matters worse for them.

In the end, I cannot shake the feeling that "painlessness" is a negative way of looking at things, while "pleasure" is the positive perspective, and in my experience it is essential to identify the positive goal as the starting point of all progress.

Now in closing I want to address one more aspect of this. Over the last couple of months in going through the Lucretius podcasts, I more convinced than ever that the "absence of pain" formulation was purely a logical construct being used against the anti-pleasure argument we've discussed before that appears in [Philebus](#) and other sources. Going through Lucretius, I've seen it observed that Lucretius(Epicurus) might have gone further than they should have with the evidence available to them, on issues like eternity and infinity especially.

Be that as it may and regardless of our modern view of eternity and infinity, I think Epicurus clearly knew what he was doing, even with the limits of his information, and he nevertheless thought it important to stake out a strong logical position against the arguments raised by the Platonists and other theists. That's why I am more convinced than ever that this "absence of pain" argument was exactly the same thing - it was a logical reply to the allegation that pleasure cannot be the goal because it has no limit.

I now see this as very much like the arguments on eternity and infinity. I personally continue to think that the Epicurean arguments on infinity and eternity remain compelling, but I agree that they aren't so important to many people today, because today, depending on our education, many of us don't think that gods created the universe or rule over us every day. That's why I think the path forward is not to get caught up in the logical arguments that were necessary to defeat Plato, except in those moments when we choose to engage in logical fencing and we choose to respond to Plato. If and when we are confronted with a Platonist asserting that pleasure is not the goal because Pleasure has no limit, we can answer: "the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain." Full stop - we have no need to take that argument any further into unsustainable discussions of "tranquility" or "painlessness is the ultimate pleasure" that contravene common sense definitions of pleasure and pain in ordinary human experience.

And to conclude, I don't think there's any evidence that Epicurus himself took those arguments any further to the extremes argued today. Epicurus uses the argument in the letter to Menoeceus and in the Principle Doctrines, but the rest of the textual record shows that Epicurus was writing and teaching on practical ways to pursue pleasurable living as non-philosophers

understand that goal. That's the reason that Epicurus said so many other good things about ordinary pleasure that appear contradictory to the stoic interpretation of Pleasure, and that's why Diogenes Laertius recorded that Epicurus endorsed both pleasures of "action" and of "rest." These views weren't contradictory to him because he kept the normal definitions always in view, and he was discussing "limit of pleasure" only for the specific purpose of addressing and refuting the Platonic argument. The best interpretation that gives effect to ALL of what Epicurus is recorded to have said is that Epicurus was both a logical fencer AND a practical ethicist at the same time - and that's what we have to be too in order to understand him.

I am confident that Epicurus would say that if it takes a degree in philosophy to make common sense out of what he taught, then he failed miserably in his teaching career. I think the opposite is the case, however. I think it takes a degree in philosophy to twist Epicurean teaching into something that ordinary people can't recognize, and it's time to throw that counter-intuitive interpretation out the window.

Post by “Don” of September 10, 2020 at 12:11 PM

Hello, [JCRAGO](#). Well, [Cassius](#) certainly has explained his position in detail. And I want to say I'm glad you decided to post to the forum to give us all the opportunity to explore differing interpretations of Epicurus's philosophy. I apologize for taking so long to post something here.

You said: **I am positively declaring that pleasure is the end of life and that the greatest pleasure is painlessness.**

I can't see any Epicurean arguing with your first clause there! 😊

As to the second clause, by painlessness, it appears you're referring to aponia (freedom from pain and exertion) paired with ataraxia (tranquility) as an example of a "static/stable pleasure" and contrasted with joy (khara) and merriment (euphrosyne) as "pleasures of movement." To me, Epicurus is not setting up a hierarchy here but merely describing different pleasures. This seems to be the only place he talks about aponia itself.

Elsewhere, Epicurus is quoted as saying he can't conceive of pleasure (the good) "without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms." (Fragment 67)

In light of that, I'm genuinely curious why you come to the conclusion that "the greatest pleasure is painlessness" or aponia? Why not ataraxia? Why not joy or merriment? Most people I've seen online gravitate to highlighting ataraxia, so your approach at least seems novel.

In your blog post, you mention "Sherman introduces a novel twofold distinction between kinetic pleasures: there is "specific" kinetic pleasure which makes us feel better by removing a specific

pain and there is "non-specific" kinetic pleasure which makes us feel better by distracting us from a specific pain." I see no justification for this in the extant writings of Epicurus.

Removal of pain is discussed in Principal Doctrine 3, but that doesn't seem to me to support aponia as the greatest pleasure: "The limit of the magnitude of pleasure (is) the entirety of the removal of that which causes pain. Where that which gives pleasure exists, during the time it is present, there is neither pain nor that which causes pain in body or mind nor either of these together."

The first clause does say that the "limit of the magnitude of pleasure is the entirety of the removal of that which causes pain." It doesn't say the state of painlessness itself but the removal of that which causes pain. And then Epicurus states that pleasure is what removes pain. When pleasure is present, pain and that which causes it are not. So, pleasure - the greatest good, the foundation and fulfillment of a blessed life - should be what we seek. Pleasure removes pain, so I don't think you can say painlessness (what you're calling "the greatest pleasure") removes pain. That seems a bit of a tautology.

I went looking for other translations that talked about "highest pleasure" and found the following:

DL X.130: "bread and water give the highest pleasure when someone in need partakes of them." Eating bread and drinking water are kinetic pleasures and merely indicative of the adage "Hunger is the best spice."

There's also Fragment 68 (quoted in Plutarch's "... Pleasant Life Impossible"): "To those who are able to reason it out, the highest and surest joy (khara, one of the kinetic pleasures) is found in the stable health of the body and a firm confidence in keeping it." That fragment seems to elevate one of the kinetic pleasures (khara) to the greatest pleasure and also defines the joy as "a well-balanced, stable condition of the body" not aponia.

I'm reluctant to use Cicero as a source (others on this forum will most likely disagree) unless he's maintaining that he's directly quoting Epicurus's writings. Cicero's commentary, even in the mouth of Torquatus, is most likely skewed to his own motives.

I'm not going to get into whether you're being positive or negative by focusing on painlessness. I simply don't think you can single out one pleasure as the greatest when, to my understanding, Epicurus didn't.