

The Nature of Work

Post by “Isychos” of February 20, 2021 at 5:00 AM

Happy twentieth all.

Long time listener, first time poster...

I have been trying to wrap my head around how pleasure fits in to the world of work (paid employment) for us as Epicureans, and how work should be viewed within our lives, considering it consumes such a large portion of our time.

Just to give a bit of context:

I would have to say most of my working life I have experienced more pain (mostly mental) than pleasure; I have tried many roles across various industries, however this sense of not feeling pleasure at work has been dominant most of the time, and the mental pain extends outside the working hours, which is very draining and does not allow me the energy to discover and devote to pleasures in my personal time.

Most of the people in my life have offered advice around how to deal with this, such as to look at work as a means to an end, however that has felt rather stoic to me.

Am I applying the measurement of pleasure vs pain correctly within the context of work?

These are just some of the thoughts I am grappling with around this topic, and may still seem a little jumbled, however it's a start.

I am hoping my Epicurean Friends can help me to clarify my thinking on this.

Thank you

***Please feel free to edit the font, as I have posted this from a “smart” phone.

Post by “Cassius” of February 20, 2021 at 6:05 AM

Good to hear from you Isychos, and happy twentieth to you too. I bet several of our regulars will have good comments on this.

I would say that this is the key: "Am I applying the measurement of pleasure vs pain correctly within the context of work?"

In asking that, it seems to me you are maybe expecting every aspect of your life to have more pleasure than pain, and probably it would be more consistent to be looking at the overall total and result rather than thinking that you (or anyone) can be successful in creating more pleasure than pain in *every* aspect of life. No doubt there are parts of life that are very difficult to be made pleasurable.

But work of course is a huge part of most peoples' lives, and if your entire work life is dominated by pain, then it is hard to think that in most cases someone would be successful in having total pleasure win out over total pain if you devote so much of your life to something you find painful, especially if "the mental pain extends outside the working hours, which is very draining and does not allow me the energy to discover and devote to pleasures in my personal time."

In my own case it always helps me to remember how short life is, and that despite whatever duties or obligations I have taken on, I only have a relatively small amount of time to accomplish in my life what I would like to accomplish. That helps me prioritize my time and gives me motivation to put aside projects that aren't as productive as they should be.

But another and maybe more fundamental aspect is that no one can tell you but you how to get the most out of your life. No doubt people can share hints and their own experiences, but your feelings are your own and you have to work with them to decide how in your own specific case you will best maximize your pleasure and minimize your pain.

These are only brief thoughts but I am sure most of us have similar issues so the more you comment on your questions the easier it will be for others to respond.

Post by "Elayne" of February 20, 2021 at 9:26 AM

Hi [isychos](#) ! This is exactly the kind of big question I hope people will take up, when they commit to choosing pleasurable lives. I agree with the things Cassius has said. We definitely don't realistically expect 100% pleasure 24-7. However, work for most of us takes up so much time that there's no sense standing in an anthill if there are other options!

A few other things to think about... you say you have tried many sorts of working roles. That doesn't necessarily mean you have ruled out the possibility that there's a type of work you would find intrinsically pleasurable! Considering many people do find such work (including me), maybe you can too. Maybe visiting a career counselor would be helpful in exploring this?

Another possibility is that your enjoyment has been negatively affected by extrinsic rewards throughout life. Your friends who've advised you to see work as a means to an end are demonstrating this, and I think your intuition is dead on that this is not the right direction--based on a large body of evidence.

Humans have a deep-seated, automatic tendency to devalue something they get extrinsic rewards for. To test this for yourself, imagine if I told you "if you eat all this pie, I'll give you cake." What?? There's got to be something wrong with that pie! We never tell children "oh you are such a good boy for eating all your pie!" And if we did? They would want and enjoy pie less. We know this from experiments on rewarding kids and adults for enjoyable actions, even including sharing their toys. They lose interest and enjoyment. Yikes, right?!

We are all subject to this extrinsic reward cycle from childhood, and it can have devastating effects on pleasure.

The more you can stop thinking of work as a means to an end and find pleasure intrinsically, even if it is also providing for your income and pleasure outside work, the more of your day will be enjoyable.

I recommend two books: Daniel Pink's Drive, about the science of human motivation (basically, wanting and liking -- anticipation of pleasure and pleasure in our activities); and Alfie Kohn's Punished by Rewards.

Post by “Don” of February 20, 2021 at 9:42 AM

Happy Twentieth! Welcome to your first post!

[isychos](#) , you bring up one of the most important topics possible: How do we apply Epicurean philosophy in our lives? As Epicurus said:

Quote

A philosopher's words are empty if they do not heal the suffering of mankind. For just as medicine is useless if it does not remove sickness from the body, so philosophy is useless if it does not remove suffering from the soul.

So, enough prologue! Here are my thoughts...

It pains me to hear you describe your work this way. I agree with your seeing "grin and bear it" as a Stoic assessment as it applies to work. However, seeing it as a means to an end has

potential. Work is instrumental in some ways - like virtues - but it can provide pleasure itself. Epicurus requires us to assess each of our choices and rejections in light of pleasure and pain.* Everything* we do is a choice. I make a choice every day to get out of bed and go to work. Could I choose not to go to work? Sure! I could choose to quit my job. I could choose to call in sick. But would each of these lead to more pleasure or pain. If I'm sick, I probably should choose not to go to work (IF this choice is available - but that's another conversation). If I choose to quit my job and have no money coming in, would that lead to more pleasure or pain. In the long run, for myself (not being able to leave civilization and live in the woods living off the land), that would lead to more pain.

I see Epicureanism as a philosophy of personal responsibility. I can't blame my lot on the gods and pray my way out. I can't blame my lot on fate and "grin and bear it." Where I'm at is a result of the choices and rejections I've made, and I'll change my lot by changing my choices based on sound reasoning (phronesis) based on my reactions of pleasure and pain based on information from my senses.

Epicurus also said:

Quote

Don't ruin the things you have by wanting what you don't have, but realize that they too are things you once did wish for.

I would assume that the job you have now was something you sought out at one time. Why? Why did your present job appear desirable at one time? Just the money? Just escape from a worse job (which at one point was also sought out)? Please don't feel that you have to reply to my questions! I just want you to think about this yourself. I'm not saying you have to just accept your job. If the work is unbearable and/or dangerous, do your best to find different work. But Epicurus, it seems to me, says nothing in our day-to-day world is purely good or purely bad. At the end of your day, look back over it. Was there at least one moment of pleasure? Was there one moment of gratitude? If you can't leave your present job, your friends may be right in that this one is a means to an end. But you have to decide what that end is. You give meaning to your work. It's not imposed from outside.

Let me say that I know none of this is easy. Being stuck in a job "just for the money" is HARD! I've been there, slogging away day in, day out. But you have the power to change your perspective based on sound philosophy.

I hope this conversation is the beginning of something helpful for you. I'll end for now with Epicurus's greetings he supposedly used in many of his letters:

Quote

Εὖ πράττειν καὶ Σπουδαίως ζῆν

"May you practice well and may your life be lived with purpose!"

Post by "Godfrey" of February 20, 2021 at 5:51 PM

Both Philodemus' On Property Management and the Buddhist tenet of right livelihood offer a framework for thinking about work. Philodemus I believe addresses proper ways for the philosopher to deal with money (broadly speaking), while Buddhist right livelihood might be a bit "idealist" for a proper Epicurean. However they both can provide food for thought.

Isycho's one thing that strikes me from your post is your statement that you've worked at various jobs in various industries. This has two implications from my perspective: you've got a range of experience that you can draw from and build on, and you're not pinned down to one career path which you may have come to dislike. So there seems to be a great degree of freedom available to you in how you choose to "earn a living." If so, take advantage of that and think creatively from the big picture down to the details regarding in what ways you might fashion the most enjoyable life for yourself.

Also keep in mind that if indeed you do have a great degree of choice, that can be an obstacle by itself in that it can be overwhelming. So approach your working life (and overall life) as a process: using the Canon and a healthy amount of reasoning, decide on what you wish to pursue and give it your all. But treat that as a starting point and keep evaluating as you go along so you can "course correct" as necessary. You don't necessarily have to make epic changes; sometimes pleasure is found in the details. Part of living as an Epicurean and following the Canon is always being aware of our sensations, preconceptions and feelings and responding appropriately to what is presented to us. To stop doing this and become attached to a fixed idea of your life is to stop being an Epicurean, even to stop living in some ways.

I spent many years on a career path that eventually became oppressive. I ended up leaving a job that I'd been at for nine years to dive into the great unknown. Not too long after, an opportunity came along which led to a fresh outlook and turned into an enjoyable new career. I never would have the opportunity if I hadn't previously addressed my fears and left my job. It was possibly the hardest thing that I've ever done, but well worth it. At the time I didn't know about Epicurus, but in retrospect what I did was put aside my fixed opinions and follow the Canon. Who knew?

Post by "Godfrey" of February 20, 2021 at 7:17 PM

Also....

Duty vs pleasure: I find that I do many things out of a sense of duty, even if they don't bring me pleasure. Duty and pleasure aren't mutually exclusive, but duty is subservient to pleasure. As a thought experiment you can examine what it would involve to go minimalist and pursue only the most natural and necessary pleasures: subsistence food, shelter and clothing. This can provide a baseline for a minimum income you would need from a job. But since EP isn't about minimalism, ponder from here what it would take to live an enjoyable life now that you have an idea of how little you could get by with.

Post by “Don” of February 20, 2021 at 7:34 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

But since EP isn't about minimalism, ponder from here what it would take to live an enjoyable life now that you have an idea of how little you could get by with.

This is exactly my take on the idea of why Epicurus may have taken periodic fasts.

Post by “isychos” of February 22, 2021 at 6:37 AM

Thank you all so much for your responses, I will have to digest these a little further, however an initial thought/question or two around experiencing more pleasure than pain, more of the time:

I understand, well at least I think I understand, that it would be unreasonable to expect to experience a continual flow of pleasurable feelings, however if the pain I am experiencing does not lead to pleasure in the future, then that pain, dare I say, is to be avoided. Perhaps I am being too rigid in how I apply my calculation of pleasure vs pain sometimes??

Could you please also help me in clarifying if I have understood this correctly: that the feelings are two, pleasure and pain, if I am not experiencing one I am experiencing the the other, as there is no neutral state, or have I reduced this a little too far?

Thank you again

Post by “Elayne” of February 22, 2021 at 7:24 AM

[isychos](#) sounds like you've got it! Maybe your wondering if the framing is "too far" reflects that this is indeed a radical philosophy! I find it very exciting! I suggest paying attention to your experience -- I have not personally experienced a condition of neither pleasure nor pain. There is a lot of variation in intensity, but I don't know of a true neutral.

Post by “Don” of February 22, 2021 at 8:34 AM

[Quote from isychos](#)

I understand, well at least I think I understand, that it would be unreasonable to expect to experience a continual flow of pleasurable feelings, however if the pain I am experiencing does not lead to pleasure in the future, then that pain, dare I say, is to be avoided. Perhaps I am being too rigid in how I apply my calculation of pleasure vs pain sometimes??

You've hit on one of the issues of the motto "Pleasure is the goal." You're absolutely right that it's unreasonable to expect warm feelings of pleasure all the time... Unless we're gods... Which we're not. The Epicurean goal is to lead the most pleasurable life possible. So, you're on the right track with your understanding.

[Quote from isychos](#)

Could you please also help me in clarifying if I have understood this correctly: that the feelings are two, pleasure and pain, if I am not experiencing one I am experiencing the the other, as there is no neutral state, or have I reduced this a little too far?

You're right. We can experience a reaction of pleasure or pain. But don't get the technical definition of feeling in an Epicurean sense confused with the definition of feeling from an everyday sense as in feeling = emotions like sadness, anger, joyfulness, etc. All of those have pleasure or pain at their root.

This may be in the weeds for you right now but I've found the work of Dr. Linda Feldman Barrett on constructed emotions very helpful in sorting out the difference.

I hope that helps. Keep the questions coming! 😊

Post by "Cassius" of February 22, 2021 at 9:14 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

You're absolutely right that it's unreasonable to expect warm feelings of pleasure all the time.

One of the subtleties here is involved in Epicurus saying that "I call you to continuous pleasure....."

I would say two aspects of that are:

(1) Pleasure of some kind or the other is always available while we are living, so in that sense it is continuous.

(2) We've discussed before the difficult issue of experiencing more than one thing at once. I think that ultimately yes we can segment out our feelings and feel pleasure at one thing and pain at another thing at the same time, but it's still true that the pain and pleasure can't coexist in exactly the same place/time. We can walk and chew gum at the same time so there are going to be a mixture of experiences at any one time, even though at the same time we consider pain and pleasure to be mutually incompatible.

That last point may need further discussion in this context but I think it is correct.

Post by "Don" of February 22, 2021 at 10:51 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

One of the subtleties here is involved in Epicurus saying that "I call you to continuous pleasure....."

Good point, [Cassius](#)

The word Epicurus uses is συνεχής

<https://logeion.uchicago.edu/%CF%83%CF%85%C...%87%CE%AE%CF%82>

There's some ambiguity to that since I see both continuous and continually in the definition. Food for thought.

Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2021 at 12:03 PM

In my view this is another of those positions that has both "logical" and "observational" sides.

It is observationally true that as long as you are alive and conscious you can summon up at least pleasant memories of the past.

But I also think this is another one of those "logical" positions in that the definition of "continuous" is important to consider. Just because some degree of pleasurable experience is continuously available that does not mean that simultaneously you are not experiencing lots of pain in the non-pleasurable parts of your consciousness.

I don't think the implication of continuous pleasure means that the "sum total" of all our experience at a particular moment is pleasurable, but that's the subtlety that needs to be explored. I am thinking that the issue is more that pleasure is continuously available to at least some degree, and therefore can still serve as the guide of life up until such time as we have no more opportunity and then it's time to die.

But I also do think that Epicurus believed that "generally" the "sum total" of our experience is enough within our control that we should in fact aim for and probably achieve a "sum total" in which the majority of experience is pleasurable most of the time. I am sure that he would acknowledge that there are very sad exceptions to that, but in general that is not a goal that is unobtainable, such as if one were to expect to actually achieve "total pleasure all the time." That would be something in theory for the gods in the intermundia, but not possible here.

Post by “Don” of February 22, 2021 at 12:34 PM

Great points, [Cassius](#) !

I think it's also significant that Epicurus uses παρακαλώ "I call, summon, send for, invite" and not "promise" or something similar.

Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2021 at 12:40 PM

I think we're now talking about something very similar to what Jordan C raised in regard to ataraxia, and it is a continuing question when you aren't really clear on the nature of the goal

and the nature of pleasure:

Quote

Jordan:

What does ataraxia mean exactly? It's usually translated as absence of anxiety. However, Philodemus talks about Epicurean business owners -- and I cannot conceive of a business owner ever being totally free from anxiety. So since Philodemus is not calling for the business-man to sell up and move to a Garden, it must mean that ataraxia has a meaning different to what I'm thinking. I have always taken ataraxia to mean: a total lack of any mental disturbance. Does it mean something else? Something that even a business-man could maintain? Could it mean cheerfulness? Just as an aside: I do NOT want this discussion to devolve into a discussion about whether ataraxia is the aim of Epicurean philosophy. I just want to know what ataraxia really means

Quote

Cassius:

This might be a good post for comment by some of our Greek-speakers. In the meantime, I personally see a couple of issues going on here, and I think that Jordan's question is in fact spurred by the discussion he does not want to have ("whether ataraxia aim of Epicurean philosophy" - the answer to which is that the aim is "pleasure" rather than ataraxia).

The example Jordan gives of Philodemus and the business owner helps illustrate how Jordan is boxed in, because a businessman will never achieve a "total lack of any mental disturbance" any more than anyone else in any other profession. Epicurus tells the businessman as he tells everyone else that sometimes it is best to choose pain, in order to achieve more pleasure in life. Disturbance is a subset of pain, so that's the trap that Jordan is in -- he has set up an intermediate step (ataraxia) in the place of the ultimate goal (pleasure). Therefore he cannot imagine ever choosing disturbance under his viewpoint, since avoiding disturbance is in his view the ultimate goal.

All this is very simple to unwind when you accept the logical framework of Epicurean philosophy. Absence of disturbance (ataraxia) and absence of pain (aponia) are instrumental only - toward **pleasure**, which is the goal. Yes, hypothetically the best way to experience pleasure is without any mixture of pain and without any period of disturbance, but we can and often do choose both pain and disturbance in the goal of achieving the most pleasure that is possible to us.

Loose talk about ataraxia rather than pleasure being the goal of life is a barrier to a full understanding of Epicurus.

Quote

Elayne:

The idea that it is "devolving" the discussion to focus on whether ataraxia is the goal -- that is part of the problem here. Ataraxia is just an absence word, like void. Absence of disturbance does not tell you what replaces it, but we know that Epicurus did not conceive of 3 states-- pain (including anxiety), pleasure, and a void state with neither. So if there is no mental disturbance, the person has to be feeling only pleasure, and pleasure is indeed our goal-- as much pleasure as possible.

When defining ataraxia, I think people get caught in the idea that disturbance includes what is now called "eustress", positive stress, and really most activity, period. That will get people into a very passive mode which is not really conducive to pleasure. For example, I went for a hike yesterday-- it was strenuous exercise, positive stress, but I enjoyed all the aspects of it, both physical and mental. I have sometimes seen commenters here calling exertion a disturbance, but if it is experienced pleurably, that is not correct. The same is true of the mind-- our minds can be active, even exerting ourselves strenuously thinking through business decisions or engaging in business-related social interactions, but if this is felt as a pleasure, then that is what it is, and ataraxia-- freedom from unpleasant disturbance-- would be present even when the person is actively engaging their mind!

Although I agree with [Cassius Amicus](#)

that the aspect of sometimes choosing pain for greater pleasure is relevant in your hypothetical, I also note that Epicurus observed he was able to maintain mental pleasure even during great physical pain, by remembering his friendships. I have a hard time thinking he would recommend to anyone that they deliberately take on life long _mental_ pain for greater pleasure, simply because he doesn't talk about any situation where that is the only option. It seems unnecessary, and if taking on lifelong mental pain is not necessary for great pleasure, why would anyone do it? It would be a hypothetical that almost no one would be advised to choose.

I owned a business for several years, and although I occasionally had some anxiety over it, this was rare, because I arranged my business decisions based on evidence of what would be successful and adjusted my actions according to what happened. I was actively engaged in running it, and I found that activity pleasurable.

Note: I am adding Martin K's comment here too:

Quote

[Martin Kalyniuk](#)

Ἀταραξία means what it does — serene state of mind.

No considerations as to its alleged unattainability by a certain class of people can prove otherwise or alter its meaning. Words do not work that way.

Is it impossible for business-persons? Absolutely not. It is, in fact, its easy achievement that makes late Hellenistic schools of philosophy perennially attractive and particularly today.

Taking things philosophically. Re-aligning one's perspective away from profit or relative financial success as the be-all and end-aim of life. The self-instantiated, repeated, realisation that what feels catastrophic is, in fact, minor on the cosmic scale and you yourself probably won't remember it in two years' time.

This empowers those in business to maintain tranquil and clear-headed amidst the surge of Tyche's toying with us. That is why Epicureanism and Stoicism are presently popular precisely with the business class.

Cassius has also made a great practical point from the Epicurean perspective. Ἀταραξία is instrumental in Epicureanism as well as Stoicism. It is the ultimate goal only of the Pyrrhonic school.

And in Pyrrhonism it has no broader reference to life at large, but rather specifically concerns questions that are (it is claimed) insoluble (i.e: every interesting aporiai).

To be bothered about business affairs is completely compatible with being imperturbable relative to humanity's hardest and trickiest theoretical problems.

Written in the back of an Uber on my way to do high value business transactions

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