

Multiple Components Comprise the Epicurean Life

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 21, 2021 at 7:59 PM

Multiple components comprise the Epicurean life. There is more to laud in the "sweetest life" than just pleasure. To say that there is only one highest good, is like saying you can only have one favorite food.

Excerpts from *Letter to Menoikos*, translation by Peter Saint-Andre:

"Let no one put off the love and practice of wisdom [note] when young, nor grow tired of it when old."

"Practical wisdom is the foundation of all these things and is the greatest good. Thus practical wisdom is more valuable than philosophy and is the source of every other excellence [note], teaching us that it is not possible to live joyously without also living wisely and beautifully and rightly, nor to live wisely and beautifully and rightly without living joyously. [note] For the excellences grow up together with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them."

And from the *Vatican Sayings* (translation by Peter Saint-Andre):

"The noble soul is devoted most of all to wisdom and to friendship — one a mortal good, the other immortal. [note]"

Post by “Don” of October 21, 2021 at 8:49 PM

I would agree that there are multiple *pleasures* and multiple *components* that lead to a pleasurable life.

Saying "pleasure is the highest good" doesn't mean it's the "best good thing among rivals." It means it's the good thing toward which every other rival points. It's at the apex of possible candidates for all good things. That doesn't mean prudence isn't good. We practice prudence and justice and virtue because they *lead* to pleasure. They are instrumental goods to leading a pleasurable life, which is the highest good.

I'll dig up my translation of the Letter and respond to your excerpts asap.

Post by “Don” of October 21, 2021 at 10:11 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"Let no one put off the love and practice of wisdom [note] when young, nor grow tired of it when old."

Yep, because the practice of philosophy "the love and practice of wisdom" leads to living pleasurable (also translated sweetly, joyously).

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"Practical wisdom is the foundation of all these things and is the greatest good. Thus practical wisdom is more valuable than philosophy and is the source of every other excellence [note], teaching us that it is not possible to live joyously without also living wisely and beautifully and rightly, nor to live wisely and beautifully and rightly without living joyously. [note] For the excellences grow up together with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them."

The context is important here, too. In the lines directly before this, Epicurus is writing about not endorsing the pleasures of the profligate and making decisions that will lead to a pleasurable life. Practical wisdom - phronesis - is essential for making those decisions on what desires to choose and which to reject to pursue a pleasurable life. The pleasurable life is "inseparable from them" precisely because they are instrumental to the highest good.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 21, 2021 at 10:27 PM

Living a pleasant and sweet life is a highest good and a highest aim.

Emphasis on action as a verb, rather than on an object or noun.

Living pleasantly and sweetly = living joyously, living wisely, living beautifully, living rightly.

Maybe it could be summed up with - living with a smile on one's face?

Post by “Godfrey” of October 21, 2021 at 11:13 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Emphasis on action as a verb, rather than on an object or noun.

For some reason this brings to mind static and kinetic pleasures. Expressed as verbs, static pleasure is *understanding* the correct philosophy while kinetic pleasure is *living* joyously, wisely beautifully, rightly.

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 6:10 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Multiple components comprise the Epicurean life. There is more to laud in the "sweetest life" than just pleasure. To say that there is only one highest good, is like saying you can only have one favorite food.

Kalosyni - I think you are having an issue with something that I recall you also brought up on the 20th, though I am not sure I can recall exactly how. I think it was in reference to your questioning how Epicurus was dividing up all feelings into pleasure and pain.

Don may have some comment on what I am about to say here, but the following is my interpretation of the issue you are questioning. The root of the issue, as I see it, gets back to the fact that Epicurus fighting against earlier philosophers (Socrates Plato Aristotle et al - let's call them SPA in this post) on issues of "dialectical logic."

We know from a variety of sources that Epicurus rejected the idea that "dialectical logic" is the key to truth. But we also know that Epicurus did not reject "reason," and we know he in fact embraced "reason."

Epicurus did not simply say: "I reject, and I advise you to reject, dialectical logic and the analysis of SPA and the rest as to the great issues of life." He provided a full explanation for his position and how to reason your way out of the SPA word-game trap. IMHO the best way to interpret the meaning of the 40 doctrines, and the 12 fundamentals of physics, is by examining them in relation to what the SPAs had taught, and considering them the key premises which, when understood, make the position of SPA impossible to accept.

And the SPAs had taught everyone up to that point to analyze the big issues of life in terms of looking for a single "greatest good" - looking for a single thing which we can define as the ultimate goal for which reason we do everything else in life.

Now IMHO what you are doing, Kalosyni, is rejecting that framework of analysis in which only one thing can be the "ultimate goal." And I think you are correct to do that, and I think Epicurus agreed with you in rejecting that. The most clear statement of this issue in the texts is this from Cicero's On Ends:

Quote

[29] IX. 'First, then,' said he, 'I shall plead my case on the lines laid down by the founder of our school himself: I shall define the essence and features of the problem before us, not because I imagine you to be unacquainted with them, but with a view to the methodical progress of my speech. The problem before us then is, what is the climax and standard of things good, and this in the opinion of all philosophers must needs be such that we are bound to test all things by it, but the standard itself by nothing. Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations.

[30] Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion. These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey sweet, no one of which facts are we bound to support by elaborate arguments; it is enough merely to draw attention to the fact; and there is a difference between proof and formal argument on the one hand and a slight hint and direction of the attention on the other; the one process reveals to us mysteries and things under a veil, so to speak; the other enables us to pronounce upon patent and evident facts. Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?

So what Torquatus was saying is that "in the opinion of all philosophers" you must go looking for a definition of the single ultimate good before you can organize the rest of your thoughts.

It appears that Epicurus may not have really endorsed that approach himself, but what is clear is that he *certainly* did not endorse the approach of approaching the question as a long logic puzzle. Epicurus said it is sufficient to prove the point through feeling, and to look at how all other animals rely on feeling to justify their pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.

But the point for now is that Epicurus was faced with the analysis that everyone else in his time had been taught, and he answered the question of "What is the greatest good?" by looking to

nature and feeling to give the answer.

I think the way to interpret this is that he was saying "in the big picture, nature gives us pleasure and pain alone as the general categories of feelings as to what to pursue and what to avoid." Now did Epicurus know that there are many different types of feelings of pleasure (and of pain)? Certainly he did. But for purposes of dealing with the logical arguments of SPA he simply categorized them all as either pleasant feelings or unpleasant (painful) feelings.

So going back to your question here is the heart of your problem:

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

To say that there is only one highest good, is like saying you can only have one favorite food.

Logically speaking, you *can* in fact, depending on how you define "favorite" have only *one* favorite food!

If you define *favorite* as "best" or "highest" then if you apply rigorous logic you can have only one of those.

You may not choose to define "favorite" that way, and you may definite "favorite" as "one of many things that you life a lot" but that is a definitional choice within the human mind, and nature itself does not require us to use one definition or the other.

For the same reason, Epicurus was not compelled by nature to talk about "the highest good" - but he was surrounded by students who had been taught by SPA that they had to do that, so he had to show them a way out of the dilemma.

I will stop there, but it is important to know that it *is* a dilemma. Once you accept the logic game that there is only a single *highest good* that can be captured in words/definitions, you have a real problem. This is the problem set forth in [Philebus](#) and it is the way Plato sought to destroy the idea of Pleasure being the guide of life. The core issue is that once you accept the necessity of playing word games, the "art of playing word games" - which is dialectical logic (what SPA defines as wisdom) necessarily becomes "the greatest good."

Anyone who accepts that premise will - like [Philebus](#) - lose the game of defining the highest good. That is why Epicurus rejected dialectical logic and why he placed the senses (including "feeling") at the center of the "canon of truth."

Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 6:14 AM

Decades ago (literally), I remember thinking (and I'm sure it's not original to me) that "the meaning of life is a *verb*, not a noun." Life is meant to be *lived*.

Now I think, Epicurus's philosophy is that life is meant to be lived *pleasurably*. Our life's path points to pleasure as our North Star. It is the destination. Along the way there will be obstacles, taking our path along circuitous routes to that goal, some painful and tortuous. But we keep our eyes on the North Star to guide us in the right direction.

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 6:23 AM

I suspect the SPA philosophers would agree with Don that life is to be lived. They would beg to differ on the issue of what it means to live - what it is that we should "to keep our eye on ... to guide us in the right direction."

Rather than "pleasure as the north star" as Don suggests, they assert either "divine revelation" (if they are Socrates talking about his demon telling him things) or "logic" (or whatever word you want to use to describe the art of word-gaming that implies that the ultimate truth of the universe is in "ideas").

So agree fully with Don and I think most of us who are attracted to Epicurus grasp that intuitively - that is largely why we are here.

What's more of a challenge is to understand the depth of the error or the lie that SPA were asserting. That's because the SPA way has been completely victorious in world history. Essentially all of us have been taught their way all our lives, and we don't want to believe that everything important we have been taught about the nature of the universe (by philosophers other than those in the Epicurean line) is essentially a lie.

Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 6:42 AM

That **was** Epicurus's rebellion against SPA (I'll be contrary and say ΣΠΑ 😊) "You're all wrong. The highest good - the star by which you should steer your ship - is the feeling of pleasure or pain. Steer towards pleasure. I don't have to 'prove' this with flowery rhetoric or fancy logic. I point to children and animals, to blessed Nature herself. That is sufficient. You all are deluding yourselves and your students with talk of virtue and 'the beautiful, the honorable (kalos).' I spit on the kalos unless it brings pleasure!"

Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 8:44 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Multiple components comprise the Epicurean life. There is more to laud in the "sweetest life" than just pleasure.

To return to [Kalosyni](#) 's original statement...

There are myriad, numerous experiences and components to laud in the "sweetest life", but the most important - the "highest" thing - to laud IS that they are part of our sweetest life possible. According to Epicurus, all we choose to do should point us in the direction of living the sweetest life. Sometimes we choose (or have no choice due to disease, death of someone close, etc.) to experience pain for a greater, pleasurable goal. I seem to always use the example of the choice of the pain of exercise 😊 Epicurus gives us agency to affect the arc of our life. We do not live at the whims of Fate. We choose. We reject. We live!

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 8:54 AM

I think we are seeing another exhibition of the slightly different approaches that Don and I are taking.

I agree with what Don has written, BUT:

We first have to have an understanding of the precise wording of what we are quoting from Kalosyni, and in my view why she is struggling with it.

"Multiple components comprise the Epicurean life. There is more to laud in the "sweetest life" than just pleasure."

As I read the sentence, she is implicitly questioning the decision to define the goal of life (or the things in life to laud) as "pleasure."

We can take Don's answer that her question is easily resolvable by pointing out the myriad numerous experiences which compose the sweetest life, that's definitely fine to do, because it explains that pleasure is composed of many different individual experiences.

But I think what Kaolsyni, and a lot of people, struggle with is that they don't like Epicurus' definition of "pleasure" as including every desirable experience in life. And I do think that is what he is doing - he has by definition postulated that everything that affects us do so either as pleasure or pain. I can't stress that enough - he's doing that BY DEFINITION. He knows just as well as you and I do that there are multiple different kinds of pleasures, but for purposes of philosophical debate - for understanding the issue - he is defining every desirable experience in life as pleasure - because we feel it to be desirable.

Until we come to an agreement on that point with people everyone who fails to accept that this is what he is doing, those people who fail to accept that are going to squirm and struggle and kick back and they are going to insist that "there is more to life than just pleasure."

And the key to understanding why he defining the word pleasure in this way is not that he is perverse or unrealistic or that he is "academic" himself. He's defining the word in this way specifically for the purpose of pointing out the flaws in the dialectical argument that his opponents are using against the idea that pleasure is the ultimate guide.

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 8:56 AM

Before Don and I go too far in debating what "others" may be doing, we really need to hear back from Kalosyni to hear more explanation from her on what she means in saying:

Multiple components comprise the Epicurean life. There is more to laud in the "sweetest life" than just pleasure.

Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 9:50 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 10:59 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

defining every desirable experience in life as pleasure - because we feel it to be desirable.

Hmmm. I may quibble with your wording and want to debate *again* the importance of the distinction between desires and "pleasure as the feeling and guide"... But I'll control myself until [Kalosyni](#) has a chance to consider our back and forth and respond.

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 11:48 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

But I'll control myself until Kalosyni has a chance to consider our back and forth and respond.

Yes I was not intending to take us back to the "desire" vs "pleasure" or "feeling" question. When I wrote desirable there I was just looking for another synonym of pleasurable - I could just as well have said "feels good" rather than "desirable."

The issue of desire and will and issues like that I consider to be matters of psychology or even some other aspect, and not really the same issue we are talking about here at all.

What I think we are talking about here is a big-picture philosophical question of "What is the ultimate goal / guide of life?"

And the warring contenders for the crown, each of which have a war-party of its own - the warring camps aligned which contain a mixture of troops within themselves, but which are broadly aligned against each other, are:

(1) religion/holiness/divinity/divine revelation, etc (the Religion Camp)

(2) "logic"/"rationality"/"wisdom"/"transcendence/virtue, etc. (the Academic Camp)

(3) feeling/pleasure-pain/Nature's faculties, etc (the Epicurean camp)

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 22, 2021 at 2:08 PM

Thank you for all your replies. I will need a bit of time re-read and digest...will respond by the end of the day.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 22, 2021 at 5:46 PM

I feel like I am not able to follow all of the various ins and outs of thought presented by [Cassius](#) regarding Epicurus vs. SPA (Socrates Plato Aristotle), as I don't have enough knowledge of those schools. Also, my knowledge of Epicurus' philosophy is sorely lacking. And I might be not directly responding to the above points, but will simply respond anyway, on the basis of my intuitive personal ideas.

A. The ultimate goal that I would like to choose for myself is to live joyously and sweetly.

B. The guide to my living joyously and sweetly is to use pleasure which is governed by wisdom and reason.

So for me it is to pursue pleasure when governed by reason and wisdom. And to be kind to myself when I make errors in judgement (which invariably will happen). Or, if at times I act out of impulse (without considering the consequences of my actions) then I shouldn't be surprised by the chance of experiencing unexpected consequences which may lead to less joy and less sweetness.

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 6:27 PM

Kalosyn I believe it would be interesting to consider you as being in the role of [Philebus](#), and picture Socrates (really Plato) responding to your comment instead of one of us:

Socrates: So K, if you believe that pleasure is governed by wisdom and reason, then you believe that wisdom and reason are superior to, and more important to have, than pleasure?

K - Well.... ?

Socrates: If so, K, then you really maintain that the ultimate most important thing for you to have is wisdom and reason, because they are the elements of life that tell you how and when to pursue pleasure and everything else.

K - ??

Socrates: On the other hand, if what you are saying is that you need both pleasure and wisdom, then you are something of a "cook" putting together the ingredients of the best life. And if you are a cook, then the art of cookery, which is the wisdom as to how to combine and process your ingredients, is really the most important thing for you to have. Right?

K - ????

Socrates: Likewise, if you are saying that you need both pleasure and wisdom, then you are saying the pleasure alone cannot be "the good" to pursue above all else. That is because if pleasure can be made better through the addition of wisdom, then pleasure alone would be definition be insufficient to be "the good." And I say that because one of the characteristics of being THE good (being "the best" or being "the highest good") is that such an ultimate objective is complete and sufficient in itself, The "highest" good can never or allow anything else to be added to it which would make it even better - or else it would not be the highest!

K - ????

So if our modern Socrates were to say those things to you, how do you think you might respond? 😊

Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 8:08 PM

Oh, you know I'm itching to "reply" to Socrates, but I'll control myself.

Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 9:44 PM

Last comment from me, [Cassius](#) : Are those quotes from [Philebus](#) or your paraphrases?

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 10:21 PM

My paraphrases based on quotes from [Philebus](#)!

I left out the "purity" argument which is also in [Philebus](#).

I got started on my attempt to chart all the arguments in the dialog but it is a bigger job than I expected. I need to basically paste the full dialog into an outlining program so I can slice and dice it by section - just like the cooks that Plato so fancied!

And one of these days I am going to finally get a grip on " the one and the many" argument -. Although I expect I am going to have to have your help to ever emerge on the other side of that one.

As I sit here in late October 2021 after years of reading it I still don't grasp all the implications of it. there are presumptions buried in it that may in the end be no deeper than the "cook" analogy, but I am convinced it is ultimately a word game intended to provide produce exactly the kind of perplexity I feel every time I read it.

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 10:25 PM

At this moment all I can think about is that meme from one of the early Star Wars movies where the rebel general exclaims "It's a trick!"

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2021 at 10:32 PM

But it is clear to me that the "trick" involves the allegation that it is necessary to slice and dice any subject up into components, which then implies that the various components must be ranked, which then leads inevitably to the conclusion that the "art of ranking" is more important than any instance of the thing you are examining. So once you admit the necessity to slice and

dice (i.e. in this case that some pleasures are better than others) you inevitably have lost the argument that pleasure is the highest good.

But it's a word game where you predetermine the result according to your definitions!

The challenge for us is to be able to explain the issue - in terms even more clear than we need to bring to bear on the related issue of "formal logic" we discussed with Martin

The issues at state are very similar and many indeed by close to identical, and it has something to do with what happens when you forget the limitations that you originally knew existed when you started the word game in th first place.

(Which is why K., If you are reading this, one of the most enjoyable and satisfying stories of Lucian is "Hermotimus")

Post by “Don” of October 22, 2021 at 11:26 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

mememe from one of the early Star Wars movies where the rebel general exclaims "It's a trick!"

<https://www.dictionary.com/e/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/its-a-trap-300x300.gif>

Post by “Godfrey” of October 22, 2021 at 11:30 PM

Cassius if I may be so bold, it seems to me that [Kalosyni](#) has again intuitively followed the thinking of Epicurus by skipping the SPA word games and ended up at PD5. I understand the value of examining the word games, at least in some situations, but in this case it feels like it's muddying the water. But please correct me if I'm wrong!

Post by “Don” of October 23, 2021 at 12:18 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2234-multiple-components-comprise-the-epicurean-life/>

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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B. The guide to my living joyously and sweetly is to use pleasure which is governed by wisdom and reason.

So for me it is to pursue pleasure when governed by reason and wisdom. And to be kind to myself when I make errors in judgement (which invariably will happen). Or, if at times I act out of impulse (without considering the consequences of my actions) then I shouldn't be surprised by the chance of experiencing unexpected consequences which may lead to less joy and less sweetness.

I think you know more than you think you do.

A. Yes! Agreed! 😊

B. Yes, although I'd suggest a slight edit...

Using wisdom and reason, I make choices to pursue my goal of living joyously and sweetly (i.e., pleurably).

Wisdom and reason in this case are *instrumental* goods used to work toward the *highest* good of living joyously and sweetly.

As to your last part, Epicurus had this to say:

"some things happen of necessity, others by chance, others through our own agency."

Post by "Godfrey" of October 23, 2021 at 12:33 AM

B. Or maybe: Pleasure and pain are the guides to my goal of living joyously and sweetly, as I choose or flee from my desires using wisdom and reason.

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2021 at 5:50 AM

I am pretty sure I understand your position, Godfrey and Don, and I think there is a possibility that you are right in this case. K. Has to be the ultimate judge of that.

But this I also believe to be true:

That every aspect of our current American society is so thoroughly anti-epicurean in nature that we must expect that anyone who has not already thoroughly examined these issues has been "programmed" with very damaging assertions about the biggest issues of life.

The issue of the role of pleasure may be simple enough for any kitten or puppy or baby to understand it, but no human of average social exposure in 2021 has escaped the preventing influence of modern culture, and simply identifying happiness or even pleasure as the goal of life is akin to the biblical assertion to the effect that "not all who call out the name of Jesus will be saved."

Certainly if K or anyone else were to choose not to pursue certain aspects of the philosophy that would be their choice and something to be respected,.

However the underlying issue that Epicurus was facing is in my view the same that we face to day - that of identifying a consistent system of thought that we can embrace confidently as that which is most consistent with our ultimate natures and which is the "best" use of our short lives.

Unless we understand the system we cannot apply it consistently in our own circumstances. We can't understand the system unless we understand the steps by which Epicurus got from "nothing comes from or goes to nothing" to his "canon of truth". And without that understanding we can't ultimately be confident in processing the "word games" that confront every one of us who were not born on and are not living on a desert island.

But in this and every case K it any other person involved has to proceed at her own speed and as she is so inclined.

Post by "Don" of October 23, 2021 at 7:30 AM

I completely agree it's up to [Kalosyni](#) to say if she is in agreement with what [Godfrey](#) and I have added.

But, it at least seems to me, by entertaining the idea that pleasure can be the guiding principle of one's life, to quote Obi-Wan Kenobi (to stick with Star Wars references), "You've taken your first step into a larger world."

I sympathize with [Cassius](#) 's perspective and concerns, but...

- We did briefly discuss the "stealth" Epicurean concepts in modern culture recently. Bringing those to light may be helpful to make them more apparent to people.
- Epicurus himself was the one who said it was sufficient to point to babies and animals to "prove" his point that pleasure was the highest good.
- Wisdom and reason, correctly applied, arise from an understanding of the whole system. But I would assert that recognizing that pleasure - living joyously and sweetly - can be a beautiful, honorable (kalos) goal in life is a pretty good first step in exploring the path of the Garden.

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2021 at 8:36 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

a pretty good first step in exploring the path of the Garden.

That would be a very interesting discussion for a separate thread -- "first steps" in exploring the path of the garden!"

Post by “Godfrey” of October 23, 2021 at 1:53 PM

There are definitely different paths into Epicurus, and the more one digs into the philosophy the more one finds, both regarding things Epicurus was responding to and the ways his thinking permeates our world today.

The pre-Socratics were a further and important influence on Epicurus, as well as on SPA, and there's much to be gained from understanding them as well.

SPA do have a grossly distorted impact on today's society, but dissatisfaction with that is exactly what has led many of us on the winding road to Epicurus. So to some extent I think the points that you are making, Cassius, are baked in to Kalosyni's thinking. I'm just getting the sense, which may or may not be correct, that in this particular thread they're digressing from where the thread was initially headed.