

In Life, There is No Antidote to Pain But Pleasure

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Anyone who studies Epicurean philosophy quickly learns that Epicurus held a definition of “gods” that is very different from what we are used to today. Whereas we define “gods” as necessarily implying omnipotence, omnipresence, and supernatural control over nature, Epicurus rejected all those assertions and defined “gods” in a much more narrow way – as beings that are perfectly happy and apparently deathless, but otherwise just as part of Nature, and subject to the rules of Nature, as are we.

In the same way, we need to be very careful when we presume we know what Epicurus was referring to in the term “pleasure.” We know with confidence that Epicurus held that pleasure and pain to be the only two motivating “feelings” given to living things by nature. (*“The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined.”* -Diogenes Laertius, Book X, Bailey, 1926)

While the feelings – the “internal sensations” – vary enormously in type, intensity, and duration, in the end any particular feeling is one of the two types – it is either pleasurable or painful, with no middle state – nothing in between. With that in mind, let’s follow several steps of analysis and consider a couple of well-sourced passages from the ancient texts:

Step 1

“It is observed too that in his treatise On the Ethical End he [Epicurus] writes in these terms: “[I]n the treatise On the End of Life he wrote, ‘I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste and withdraw the pleasures of love and those of hearing and sight.’” – Diogenes Laertius, Book X, Bailey, 1926.

Here we see Epicurus using the word “pleasure” in the way that we tend to find most familiar – citing a list of pleasurable activities that we perceive directly to be pleasurable. We therefore know that Epicurean “pleasure” includes normal, everyday, active pleasures. We also know from reliable quotations that Epicurean pleasure includes what we might consider more “mental” pleasures as well. In short, Epicurean “pleasure” is a term that encompasses all pleasures of all types – physical and mental. *See also: “Epicurus differs from the Cyrenaics about pleasure. For they do not admit static pleasure, but only that which consists in motion.*

But Epicurus admits both kinds both in the soul and in the body, as he says in the work on Choice and Avoidance and in the book on The Ends of Life and in the first book On Lives and in the letter to his friends in Mytilene. Similarly, Diogenes in the 17th book of Miscellanies and Metrodorus in the Timocrates speak thus: 'Pleasure can be thought of both as consisting in motion and as static.' And Epicurus in the work on Choice speaks as follows: 'Freedom from trouble in the mind and from pain in the body are static pleasures, but joy and exultation are considered as active pleasures involving motion.' Diogenes Laertius, Book X, Bailey, 1926.

Step 2

And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good. Diogenes Laertius, Book X, Letter to Menoecus, Bailey, 1926.

I would submit that in step 1 we identified “pleasure” as a sweeping term that describes a boundless universe of mental and physical pleasures. As we think about that from a wider perspective, we realize that “pleasure” is as stated by Diogenes Laertius – an “internal sensation” – a faculty – and that the only unifying aspect of whether an activity or a choice of any kind is pleasurable or not is whether our faculty of pleasure tells us that it is. Here in step 2 of this analysis, the question is whether there is some standard of choice outside of pleasure which is itself higher than pleasure, and if so what that standard is. In order to keep this analysis manageable, I ask you to accept for a moment that there is a large choir of adversaries of Epicurus who hold that exactly such an outside standard exists, going by one of at least three names that I will include here: “Virtue,” “God,” and “Reason.” I don’t have time here to dissect those, but keep them in mind as you consider what Epicurus is saying in the Step 2 passage above.

Epicurus is setting forth that indeed there are times when we choose pain over pleasure, or we defer taking a pleasure that is available to us. Does he cite “virtue” or “god” or “reason” as the explanation for that choice? No! Epicurus cites no standard for choice and avoidance in pleasure (and pain) other than will the choice lead to other and greater pleasure (or avoidance of greater pain) in the long run – in total. While it is certainly clear, and Epicurus says so in other places, that “reason” is a tool which is to be employed in making these choices more effectively, reason is not itself the goal – the goal is only the pleasure attained or the pain avoided. Again for the sake of time I can only note in this context that “virtue” holds exactly the

same status in the Epicurean texts as reason. As the goal is pleasure, “virtue” is nothing more than a description of types of choices that are successful in leading to pleasure in life – not an end in itself. And in this Epicurean context do I have to point out that “God” is also not a superior force overriding pleasure and pain? Depending on your view of Epicurean theology “gods” may be literal or figurative examples of conduct to which we should aspire, but only because it is also clear in Epicurean theology that gods are gods because they have succeeded in developing a lifestyle that enables them to experience nothing but unending pleasure.

And for this brief essay here is the last point to consider:

Step 3

“He {Publius Clodius} praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure {the Epicureans}. ... He added that these same men were quite right in saying that the wise do everything for their own interests; that no sane man should engage in public affairs; that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures. Note: [Here is a link](#) to Perseus where the Latin and translation of this can be compared. The Latin is: “nihil esse praestabilius otiosa vita, plena et conferta voluptatibus.” Cicero, In Defense of Publius Sestius 10.23

Here in step 3 is the payoff conclusion I would ask you to consider. The internet and modern academia are full of people who argue that “Tranquillism” is the goal of Epicurean philosophy. These people argue that “tranquility” is a semi-Stoic state that is separate and higher than what we ordinary and mere mortals can understand. They reach this conclusion through a series of backflips about the definition of “pleasure” – backflips that drain “pleasure” of all ordinary meaning and significance. I won’t cite those arguments for what I think is better called “Tranquilizerism” here, as it is impossible to avoid them in most discussions of Epicurus.

What I am suggesting is that in seeking to brand Epicurean philosophy in what he thought was its most unflattering light, Epicurus’ enemy Marcus Cicero has left us one of the most clear keys for understanding the relationship between “tranquility” and pleasure.

Cicero also left us one other and even more clear definition of the highest life: *“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.”* (Cicero’s *On The Nature of The Gods*, H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 1914)

Conclusion

I therefore suggest the Epicurean analysis of Pleasure goes this way:

1 - Pleasure is a faculty which embraces all types of pleasurable conduct - mental and physical.

2 - There is no standard of conduct or choice higher than pleasure. All choices and avoidances made in life are calculated to maximize our total experience of pleasure over our lifetimes. Duration, intensity, and personal choice as to type of pleasures are all factors which we must consider in living our own lives, but “virtue,” “reason,” and “divinity” are not. “Virtue,” “reason,” and “divinity” are nothing more than conceptual tools for the more successful achievement of our goal of pleasurable living.

3 - Our goal in life should therefore be to maximize our experience of ordinary mental and physical pleasures. The maximization of pleasure means by definition that pains are eliminated or reduced to a bare minimum. Such pains which do occur are short in duration and small in intensity. The resulting state of uninterrupted pleasures - and nothing more esoteric - is what is being referenced in Epicurean literature as the goals of “tranquility” and “absence of pain.”

And from these three steps I would make the assertion stated in the title of this post: ***In life, there is no antidote to pain but pleasure.***

