

Atlantic article about enjoyment vs. pleasure

Post by “Kalosyni” of April 7, 2022 at 10:21 AM

I found this article maybe a week ago and finally posting as it presents some interesting ideas, though I myself do not necessarily agree with everything in it. It might illuminate a need to work with our Epicurean definition of pleasure, and also the ways in which non-Epicureans might get "hung-up" on the subtlety of our philosophy.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2022/03/enjoyment-not-pleasure-creates-happiness/627583/>

Here is an interesting excerpt:

Quote

Pleasure can be a boon or a burden, depending on our relationship to it. It can leaven laborious days, or lead us to waste them. The pleasures of a mild stimulant such as caffeine can be harmless or even beneficial, but the pleasures of amphetamines can be deadly.

This creates a puzzle for the happiness seeker, who must navigate between the twin perils of puritanism and indulgence, leading to the much-dreaded rule of moderation, which is more or less the philosophy of leaving any party as soon as it gets really good. Fortunately, there is a better way to solve the puzzle: To stay at the party without letting it get out of control, choose enjoyment instead.

Enjoyment and *pleasure* are terms often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. Pleasure happens to you; enjoyment is something that you create through your own effort. Pleasure is the lightheadedness you get from a bit of grain alcohol; enjoyment is the satisfaction of a good wine, properly understood. Pleasure is addictive and animal; enjoyment is elective and human.

I personally think that one can actively create both pleasure and enjoyment. And also both pleasure and enjoyment can simply "happen" when the circumstances line up in their favor. Pleasure is felt in the body and enjoyment is felt in the mind, and so enjoyment is a mental process of appreciating pleasure. Also, as Epicureans, we use reason to discern what leads to a good long-term result of our "pleasure choices", and short-term pleasures are good as well, when they are life enhancing.

There are other good points which may make sense or not. So if anyone reads this and has ideas or comments, please share. 😊

Post by “Joshua” of April 7, 2022 at 4:09 PM

I had already read this, and thought of posting it; but now I can't remember much from it!

Post by “Cassius” of April 7, 2022 at 8:30 PM

I am thinking that it is a pretty typical article that tries to build an argument against pleasure by presuming unintelligent pursuit of it, which of course Epicurus deals with very well, but I haven't had a chance to read much of it yet.

Kalosyni asked me about posting it and I assured her that it was fine to do so even if substantially "wrong." Any major article in a popular publication is pretty much fair game, because learning to spot problems and figuring out the proper responses is a lot of what Epicurus seems to have been teaching even in the ancient world. It's important to be able to respond especially to arguments that seem superficially persuasive.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 8, 2022 at 1:33 AM

What he describes as enjoyment sounds to me pretty much like pleasure as envisioned by Epicurus.

Definition of enjoyment (all definitions from Merriam-Webster online):

1a) the action or state of enjoying

1b) possession and use: the enjoyment of civic rights

2) something that gives keen satisfaction: the poorest life has its enjoyments and pleasures

Definition of enjoy:

- *intransitive verb: to have a good time*

- *transitive verb: 1) to have for one's use, benefit, or lot; experience: enjoyed great success 2) to take pleasure or satisfaction in*

Definition of pleasure: (Entry 1 of 2, noun)

1) desire, inclination: wait upon his pleasure— William Shakespeare

2) a state of gratification

3a) sensual gratification; 3b) frivolous amusement

4) a source of delight or joy

Definition of pleasure: (Entry 2 of 2, verb)

- *transitive verb: 1) to give pleasure to: gratify; 2) to give sexual pleasure to*

- *intransitive verb: 1) to take pleasure: delight; 2) to seek pleasure*

Definition of pleasure: (from Oxford Languages online)

- *a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment.*

From this quick Google search, I'd say that the author's choice of words is somewhat sloppy. Then again, the English language doesn't seem to be very specific when it comes to these ideas. Might this point to a cultural lack of appreciation of pleasure and enjoyment? I wonder how these concepts are expressed in, say, French?

Post by “Don” of April 8, 2022 at 5:29 AM

Ask and ye shall receive...

French: plaisir "pleasure"

Etymology

From Middle French plaisir, from Old French plaisir, from Latin placēre, present active infinitive of placeō. Compare Occitan plaser (“pleasure”), Catalan plaer (“pleasure”), Italian piacere (“pleasure”), Spanish placer (“pleasure”), Portuguese prazer (“pleasure”), Romanian plăcere (“pleasure”).

[PLAISIR : Définition de PLAISIR](#)

French:

Look up "enjoy" in Wiktionary and get:

French: (with a noun) profiter de, jouir de, (with a verb) apprécier, prendre plaisir (fr) "take pleasure"

Jouir.

Etymology

From Middle French jouir, jouïr, iouyr, from Old French joïr, from Vulgar Latin *gaudīre (*gaudiō), from Latin gaudēre, present active infinitive of gaudeō. Doublet of gaudir, which was a borrowing.

Doesn't Lucretius use gadeamus somewhere?

I'm personally getting tired of this parsing by English pontificators and writers and cultural "intellectuals" in dancing around "pleasure" as if it's a four-letter word. Enjoyment, happiness, etc = pleasure = voluptas = ηδονή

Post by “Don” of April 8, 2022 at 5:49 AM

I really want to write a book (in my spare time 😊) entitled:

Pleasure is not a Four-Letter Word

The Garden Path to Well-Being

and lure people in under the guise of a "self-help" book but - surprise! - it's really an introduction to Epicurus's philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of April 8, 2022 at 7:00 AM

A lot of it seems to come down to something like Plato was arguing in [Philebus](#):

If you split hairs with words and divide up "types of pleasure" so that you can argue that one type is better than another, then you think you arrive at the conclusion that knowledge about

types of pleasure ("knowledge") is more important than pleasure itself. You then start putting "knowledge" on a pedestal instead of "pleasure," and you become a pointy-headed intellectual ivory-tower elitist and you sell admission to the "in-crowd" for a living.

If you in the other hand with Epicurus you honestly and with candor acknowledge that pleasurable feeling (whatever name you want to give it) is the only end result that is desirable in itself, then you end up in the position of the boy who points out to the world that the "emperor has no clothes" and that the "in-crowd" is taking everyone else for a ride.

The choice to go with Epicurus is not only "true" and has many good effects, but it also tends to make the "in-crowd" extremely unhappy, and their unhappiness makes you the perpetual target for ridicule from places like The Atlantic trying to convince you Epicurus was wrong.

Which is why there will also always be a crying need for EpicureanFriends.com and "Pleasure is Not A Four Letter Word" and innumerable other similar responses.

We need to be as organized and energetic as they are.

Post by "Cassius" of April 8, 2022 at 7:10 AM

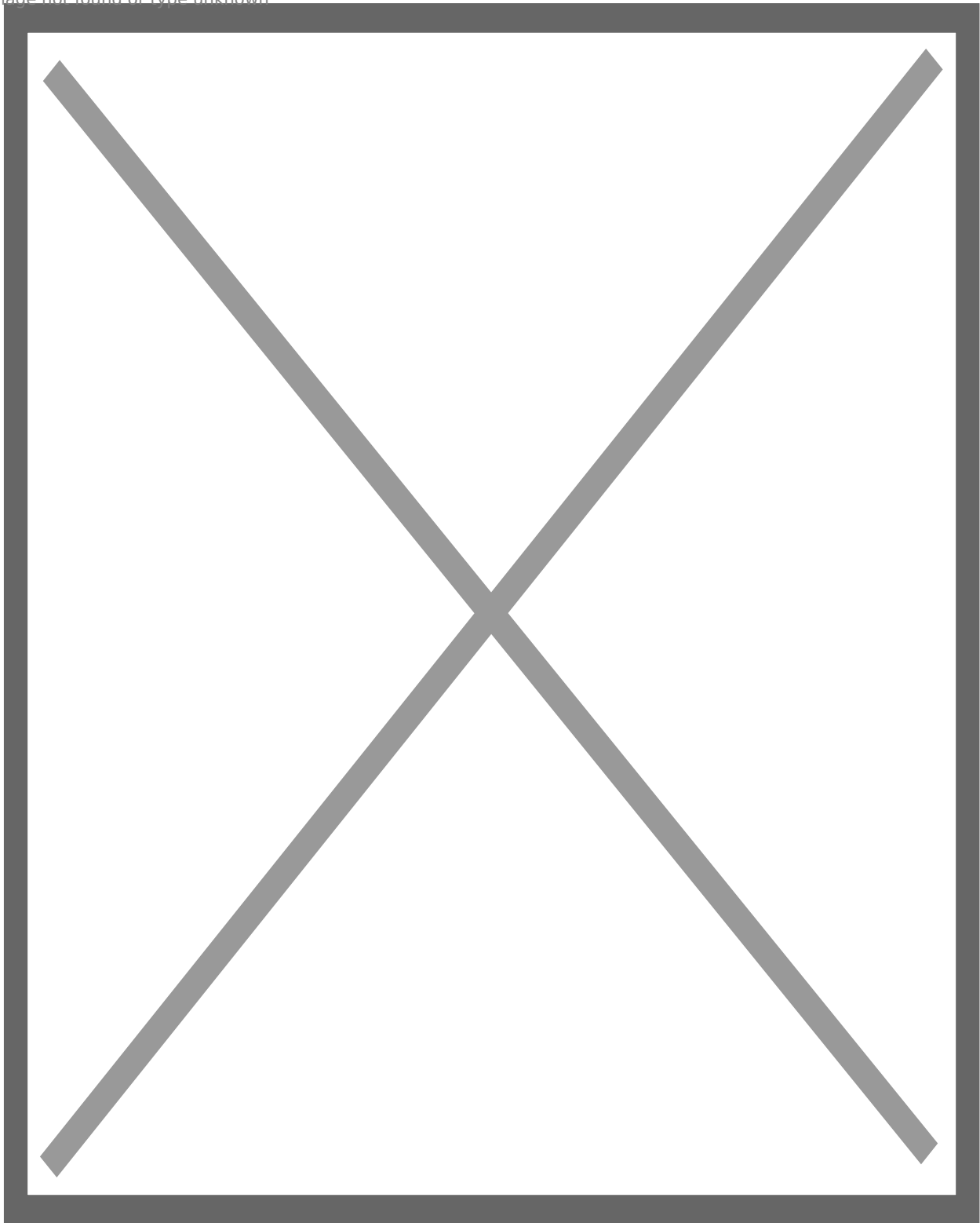
The never-ending nature of the dispute kind of makes you sympathize with the frustration that Diogenes of Oinoanda must have felt, but the response is not to get frustrated but to pick up a megaphone, per Elli's graphic:

Diogenes Shouting To All Greeks and Non-Greeks

Post by "Don" of May 3, 2022 at 6:57 AM

I just happened on this Atlantic article again on Instagram, and - yes - it still annoys me. I was about to post then did a search here on the forum. I thought I remembered our discussion. To be very clear from my perspective, Arthur C. Brooks, the author, is just doing some "clever" Platonic/Ciceronian word play and parsing for his own ends. Epicurus recognized different kinds of pleasure, writ large, including (but not limited to!) ataraxia, aponia, euprosyne (mirth, merriment, gleefulness), and khara (joy, exultation). Interestingly, Euprosyne was one of the Graces/Charites in Greek mythology

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[Charites - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

The idea that "enjoyment" is "superior" to "pleasure" just displays an ignorance of the topic under discussion and sloppy wordplay.

And that's my rant for this morning (Steps off soapbox)

Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2022 at 7:11 AM

I don't think that there is anything more important in the way Epicurus was presenting the issues than to emphasize that he was including *everything* that feels good in any way at all (physically, mentally, emotionally, or any word we might choose to use) under the term "pleasure."

That's the way you get around the constant temptation to rank some good feelings as *better* than others.

Of course the other issue is that indulging in some pleasures in some contexts will bring more pain than pleasure, but that's a contextual issue and different people will answer differently how much pain should be accepted for a particular pleasure.

The pain calculation is a "practical" consideration that varies by person and context, but the decision to include *everything* that we find feels good under the term "pleasure" (rather than insist on 50 different terms) is - to me - definitional and philosophical.

And it is something that is not at all clear to everyone, and needs to be explained.

If you want to maintain that all pleasure is good, as Epicurus did, even though every pleasure is not to be chosen at all times, then you are making a sweeping statement ("all pleasure is good") which does not allow of any exceptions. So if you start ranking some as more good or less good, then you're not following Epicurus' own analysis.

"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."
(letter to Menoeceus)

Post by “reneliza” of May 3, 2022 at 1:18 PM

I have a question on the "all pleasure is good" that seems partially relevant here. I hope I can express it properly. It's less about "every pleasure is good yet not every pleasure would be chosen" and is more about whether a pleasurable sensation in the body is even a pleasure at all if it's not appreciated by the mind.

What about things where the actual experience of the sensation can vary depending on context? There's plenty of things that could fall into this category but one of the most concrete examples I thought of was this chicken processing factory near my parents' home. I would regularly drive past and at first think "Mmmm that smells good," but once I remembered it wasn't a chicken restaurant and was instead basically a chicken factory it turned my stomach and the previously appealing odor became disgusting.

True, I would choose not to engage in the experience altogether, but is that original sensation still "good"? Is masochistic fulfillment "evil"? If the sheer sensations would be painful or pleasurable out of context then how do we classify them (especially as in my example where the context is initially unknown)?

Or is this just unnecessary overanalysis which I do quite enjoy?

Post by "Cassius" of May 3, 2022 at 1:25 PM

It is not at all overanalysis and there are millions of examples. You may like chocolate ice cream, at least or the first couple of cups. But when you reach a gallon or more, I would be that you find the very same ice cream you were at first eating with pleasure has turned decidedly unpleasurable.

Is this something that is obvious to us that Epicurus has missed? No, of course I would say "no" to that - so there is an answer (or multiple answers) that everyone studying Epicurus needs to be prepared to explain.

Let's see who wants to go first but in the meantime Reneliza, have you read Nietzsche's book "Beyond Good and Evil?"

Post by "Cassius" of May 3, 2022 at 1:37 PM

Reneliza if you were to ask that question many places on the internet you might get an answer like this:

[Pleasure as the Highest Good - a short reading from Epicurus' 'Letter to Menoecus' - The Daily Idea](#)

Epicurus argues that pleasure is the highest good in this classic reading from Letters to Menoecus
thedailyidea.org

Introduction

In this passage from the Letter to Menoecus, Epicurus (341 - 270 B.C.), summarizes two of his most famous ethical doctrines: that death should not be feared and that pleasure is the highest good. However, pleasure for Epicurus is not the indulgence of fine foods, drinking beer, and sex. Pleasure is simply the absence of pain. So for Epicurus, a simple life of quiet contemplation is the most pleasurable and therefore ideal life.

And from that you might conclude that fine food, drinking beer, and sex are not pleasures at all!

I for one would disagree strongly that that is what Epicurus taught.

So this is a very important topic.

Post by “Don” of May 3, 2022 at 3:09 PM

67. "I do not think I could conceive of the good without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms."

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἔγωγε ἔχω τί νοήσω τὰγαθὸν ἀφαιρῶν μὲν τὰς διὰ χυλῶν ἡδονάς, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀφροδισίων, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀκροαμάτων, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ καὶ τὰς διὰ μορφῆς κατ' ὄψιν [those by way of shapes and along with vision] ἡδέας κινήσεις [pleasing motion].

PS: I really like the fact that the word simply translated as "sex" is ἀφροδισίων "aphrodisiōn"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, Α α, , ?αφριος , Αφροδίσ-ιος](#)

So, he's referring to those things related to Aphrodite which include sexual desire but encompass a wider range of pleasures:

<https://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Aphrodite.html>

Post by "Cassius" of May 3, 2022 at 5:28 PM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

True, I would choose not to engage in the experience altogether, but is that original sensation still "good"? Is masochistic fulfillment "evil"? If the sheer sensations would be painful or pleasurable out of context then how do we classify them (especially as in my example where the context is initially unknown)?

Or is this just unnecessary overanalysis which I do quite enjoy?

Reneliza I did not mean to avoid the question. I was hoping some others would jump in and I hope others besides Don still will, because this is such a key question.

My basic response as hinted above is that the "good" and "bad" terminology is what has to be scrutinized. Those are very abstract terms, and they are very similar to the "virtue" question. There is a lot of discussion in Epicurean philosophy to the effect that "virtue" and "good" and "evil" are entirely relative concepts, and that they vary entirely by context.

On the other hand, pleasure and pain are sensations, and while we are experiencing them there is no mistake as to what we are experiencing.

You are quite right though that the very same experience can change from pleasurable to painful very quickly, but while we are experiencing it, pleasure and pain are given to us as perceptions which our minds do not evaluate separately. To the extent we are talking about mental pains and pleasures, those too vary quickly, but are unmistakable for the moments we are experiencing them.

I don't think I have previously addressed you personally on the suggestion to read the Dewitt book as soon as you can. It is now flawless, but it is a very good general introduction to the philosophy, and it will acquaint you with the basic issues and give you a good overview faster than any other way.

If you are an experienced reader of philosophy you can consider reading Diogenes Laertius or Lucretius directly, but I think those require significant background in philosophy before you can catch the depth of them.

You might possibly be interested in "A Few Days In Athens" as that covers your question in "story" form, but that depends on your tastes.

For now, the thumbnail summary is that Epicurus rejected over-analysis of the question of "what is the good?" and "what is the highest good?" which most of the other schools were fond of obsessing over. Epicurus concluded that the universe is entirely natural, without supernatural influence, and that the only directives of nature we are given by which to know what to pursue and what to avoid ultimately come down to "pleasure" and "pain" -- which we know without mistake as feelings.

You might well profit from reading the Torquatus narrative in Cicero's On Ends, as that too is pretty direct and understandable on this point: [Cicero's "Torquatus" Presentation of Epicurean Ethics - from "On Ends"](#)

You will quickly grasp the point that Epicurus is making, and you'll see that when he says things close to "all pleasure is good" the analysis that has to be understood is much more focused on the implications of "Good"

Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2022 at 5:35 PM

Ok that's my first stab at a longer answer to Reneliza. We need some of our other regulars to weigh in on this question, which is probably one of the ones we'll encounter most often in new people.

And ReneLiza if the responses you are getting are not addressing the question or you want comment on more specific areas let us know!

Post by “Don” of May 3, 2022 at 7:31 PM

I was at work today so only got to briefly add to this conversation.

▮ [Quote from reneliza](#)

It's less about "every pleasure is good yet not every pleasure would be chosen" and is more about whether a pleasurable sensation in the body is even a pleasure at all if it's not appreciated by the mind.

My reaction to that is somewhat of a tautology: Every pleasurable feeling is pleasurable. Epicurus equates "the good" with pleasure, therefore, "the good is good" and "pleasure is pleasure." Any pleasurable feeling is good... BUT - the BIG Epicurean BUT - not every pleasurable feeling should be chosen because some pleasurable feelings will lead to pain.

For example, drinking alcohol can provide a pleasurable feeling. Endless all-night drinking parties will lead to pain and are therefore not choiceworthy. Eating a succulent [insert favorite fruit] is pleasurable. Eating a bushel of your favorite fruit is going to lead to a gastrointestinal distress. BUT the pleasurable feeling doesn't change, it is the assessment and consequences. We can't control whether we *feel* pleasure or not.

Epicurus maintained we have two feelings - two guides - for making choices and rejections: pleasure and pain. MANY actions and thoughts provide pleasure and pain. But Epicurus (per Diogenes Laertius) said, "The feelings are two, pleasure and pain."

[Quote from reneliza](#)

is that original sensation still "good"? Is masochistic fulfillment "evil"? If the sheer sensations would be painful or pleasurable out of context then how do we classify them (especially as in my example where the context is initially unknown)?

Excellent questions, and all ones we've dealt with and continue to deal with! "Good" and "evil" seem to only be equated with "pleasure" and "pain" according to Epicurus. BUT - there's that BUT again - we can't classify things that provide pleasure or pain in any kind of absolute, eternal hierarchy. (See my alcohol and fruit analogy above). However, Epicurus says "it is not an endless string of drinking parties and festivals, and not taking advantage of slaves and women, nor does an extravagant table of fish and other things bring forth a sweet life but self-controlled reasoning and examining the cause of every choice and rejection and driving out the greatest number of opinions that take hold of the mind and bring confusion and trouble." This also brings in the measure of Epicurean justice in "to neither harm nor be harmed."

You bring up some very good questions, so keep them coming... and I hope you're willing to investigate the answers along with the other members of this little online Garden. 😊

Post by "Godfrey" of May 3, 2022 at 8:33 PM

I'll chime in briefly with [PD10](#) (Peter Saint-Andre translation):

"If the things that produce the delights of those who are decadent washed away the mind's fears about astronomical phenomena and death and suffering, and furthermore if they taught us the limits of our pains and desires, then we would have no complaints against them, since they would be filled with every joy and would contain not a single pain or distress (and that's what is bad)."

This is a pretty succinct statement of the "goal" of Epicurean philosophy, although you might have to read it a couple of times and let it percolate.

Post by "Cassius" of May 3, 2022 at 8:58 PM

The only thing I would tweak on Don's response is this:

[Quote from Don](#)

not every pleasurable feeling should be chosen because some pleasurable feelings will lead to pain.

Since you're early in the reading of Epicurus, Renelliza, I would stress that this probably needs to be stated as:

"...not every pleasurable feeling should be chosen because some pleasurable feelings will lead to MORE PAIN THAN THAT PLEASURE IS WORTH TO YOU".

I think Don and i are together on that point and he probably will agree with me - I am sure he will say so if he does not.

The same people who will argue that "absence of pain" is the heart of Epicurean philosophy rather than "Pleasure" will argue to you that it is necessary according to Epicurus to banish every pain at every moment, and to never take any course of action that will lead to any pain whatsoever.

That's clearly NOT what Epicurus says in the letter to Menoeceus or other places -- Epicurus is realistic and knows that life requires exertion, and much exertion is painful, and yet we sometimes choose a painful action anyway not only to avoid worse pain, but to achieve pleasures that greatly outweigh the cost in pain.

If Don or anyone thinks I am misstating that please correct me.

Quote

Letter to Menoecus:

For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good.

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.

Post by “reneliza” of May 3, 2022 at 9:52 PM

I did start reading DeWitt today! (I haven't read the Nietzsche)

I haven't even read the letter to Menoecus yet because I was waiting to have a little bit better foundations...but then this thread popped up and I couldn't help but ask haha

So I have a degree in neuroscience (which does contribute to my understanding that the mind/soul are of nature) and that's where a lot of my curiosity comes from. A person with perfectly functioning eyes and optic nerves with occipital lobe damage that leaves them blind would be unable to experience visual pleasure. But then there's all kinds of other brain weirdness where we may have awareness of something but not be aware that we are aware (or at least we may be partially unaware of our awareness - seen in split brain experiments).

I didn't really realize this when I first posted earlier today, but I think my question stems from my own background of anxiety and depression leading to regular dissociation in avoidance of everyday pains (which of course in turn also made me unaware of everyday *pleasures*, and sometimes even more luxurious pleasures like a bowl of ice cream eaten while doomscrolling.)

Is pleasure still pleasurable if not appreciated by the mind?

I think this goes to what Kalosyni said about the Epicurean definition of pleasure, if I understand them. A year ago I would've thought that pleasure is just good feeling, and that whether or not I paid attention to it didn't really make any difference. But if I understand correctly, pleasure is enjoyment is happiness, so this whole article is unnecessary. Except that a lot of people DO misunderstand what is meant as pleasure, so the overall point in the article could be useful even though it's expressed very poorly.

Although I've had many "pleasures" in life (honestly it has never occurred to me to think of pleasure as bad so that wouldn't be a risk for me) I *haven't experienced very much pleasure* due to repeated distraction.

In other words, I haven't had much *enjoyment* and the pleasures have been hollow not because there's anything wrong with pleasure - or because of "higher" or "lower" forms of pleasure, but just because I haven't given them enough attention to appreciate them. The sensual experience of eating a bowl of ice cream holds very little pleasure for me if I don't also have a mental appreciation of the experience. (this is my experience)

Even though I've only started learning about Epicureanism in the past week, I've started doing this - to stop and smell the roses as people say - for the last few months and it has vastly improved my enjoyment of life in general and most things in it. It has even drastically reduced my anxiety and depression so that the overall everyday pain is far less and therefore it's less tempting to cover it up in the first place unless I'll actually get some pleasure by the cover itself. So I will continue to indulge (though ideally not overindulge) in pleasure, but with an emphasis on experiencing and truly enjoying that pleasure.

I get the impression based on other replies here that the Epicurean take is that that enjoyment IS pleasure and so the Atlantic article is silly for trying to demonize pleasure (I agree) while encouraging enjoyment which is itself pleasure - the thing they were just demonizing. My point is only that a year ago I would've told you that I had all kinds of pleasure in my life - but I really did need the reminder *to actually enjoy things instead of mindlessly consuming*, and in the world we live in I think a LOT of people do (although, preferably without the suggestion that we eschew pleasure which doesn't even make sense in context).

That was a lot of words to say the same thing in a lot of different ways in the hopes that one of them adequately conveys what I'm trying to say 😄 I think I'm coming upon something more, but I'll wait until I've read more and have a deeper understanding of Epicurus's original teachings

Post by “Don” of May 3, 2022 at 10:10 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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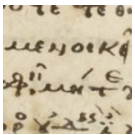
[Quote from reneliza](#)

I haven't even read the letter to Menoecus yet because I was waiting to have a little bit better foundations..

If you want to jump in on the deep end, feel free to check out my translation and notes on the Letter:

File

[Epicurus's Letter to Menoikeus - A New Translation with Commentary](#)



An in-depth translation and commentary of Epicurus's Letter to Menoikeus.



Don

July 19, 2023 at 11:25 PM

Post by “Don” of May 3, 2022 at 10:16 PM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

the Atlantic article is silly for trying to demonize pleasure (I agree) while encouraging enjoyment which is itself pleasure - the thing they were just demonizing.

Well put!! What you said exactly! 😊

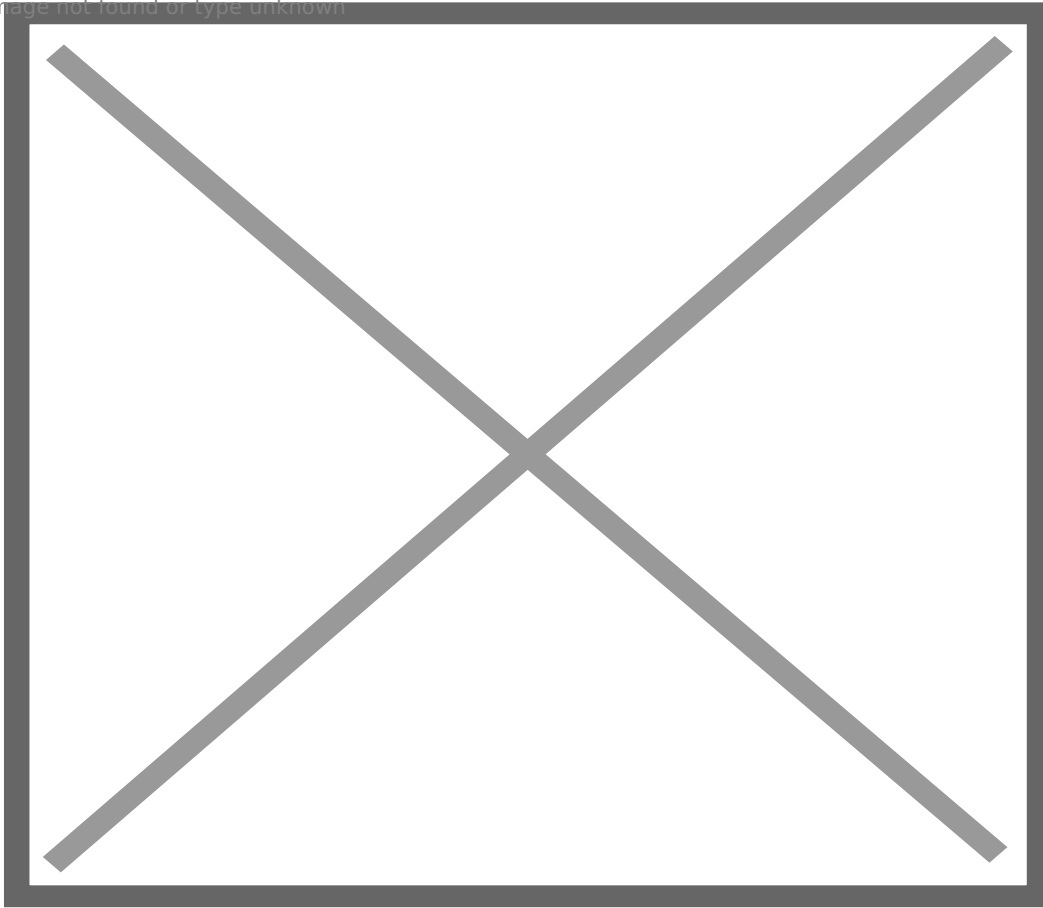
Post by “Don” of May 3, 2022 at 10:23 PM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

So I have a degree in neuroscience (which does contribute to my understanding that the mind/soul are of nature)

You might be interested in some of my posts and others on the brain research of Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett

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as well as Dr. Anna Lembke.

I found both of their books to be fascinating and, for me, to have some real intersections with Epicurean philosophy. Barrett and Feldman aren't Epicureans, but I found their work to be helpful in bringing Epicurean insights into a modern framework.

Post by “reneliza” of May 3, 2022 at 10:25 PM

My husband brings up that I have described to him the experience of feeling as though I am a brain living inside a meat mecha and that this is very likely influencing my experience of pleasure here and a) I deeply agree b) this is something I'll definitely ponder more

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2452-atlantic-article-about-enjoyment-vs-pleasure/>

Post by “reneliza” of May 3, 2022 at 10:26 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from reneliza](#)

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I'll definitely look into that!

Post by “Godfrey” of May 4, 2022 at 12:52 AM

[reneliza](#) regarding your post #20 above: in EP the feelings of pleasure and pain are our guides to living a pleasant life. In order to use them properly, we need to be aware of these feelings. If you're eating ice cream while doomscrolling, then not only are you not aware of the pleasure that comes from eating the ice cream but you are also unaware of the pain that comes when you've over indulged. So you're definitely on the right path in trying to be more conscious of your pleasures. For me, trying to be aware of my various feelings of pleasure and pain is a key Epicurean "exercise".

Post by “Godfrey” of May 4, 2022 at 12:55 AM

I'll second what [Don](#) said in post #26 👍

Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2022 at 7:18 AM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

That was a lot of words to say the same thing in a lot of different ways in the hopes that one of them adequately conveys what I'm trying to say 😊 I think I'm coming upon something more, but I'll wait until I've read more and have a deeper understanding of Epicurus's original teachings

Somehow I missed reading this post at the time it was posted - maybe we crossposted.

So it looks like I better address another fundamental point about this "what is pleasure?" discussion:

ReneLisa I see your perspective as intersecting with Kalosyni's recent post about REBT / CBT and therapy, and i think my comments in that thread apply here too. [Is Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy Compatible with Epicureanism?](#)

In my view, Epicurean views need to be thought of first as a "philosophy" of life - a world view. Yes Epicurean philosophy is practical, and yes it will lead in many practical directions, but Epicurean philosophy is not first and foremost a "therapy" as modern Stoicism has become.

My point here is that Epicurus' discussions about "pleasure" are - in my view - primarily tuned to addressing some basic philosophic questions. Epicurus is starting by asking "What is the nature of human life?" and "What is the goal of human life?" -- big picture items like those. In that field, the big alternatives argued by others are (1) Being pious (following god/religion like the priests tell you), or (2) Being "rational" (following "reason" or "logic" like Plato or Aristotle or Mr Spock might tell you), or (3) Being "virtuous" or being "a good person" (like the Stoics or fundamental "Humanists" might tell you). I am sure there are other major categories too.

I think that's the first way you have to understand Epicurus. When he says things to the effect that "pleasure is the goal of life" he's contrasting that conclusion to (1), (2), or (3) above. He's not prescribing a medication or giving precise clinical advice for particular person to follow at a particular moment.

AFTER you reject (1), (2), and (3) and realize why they are wrong (for reasons such as there is no "supernatural god" and no "fate" and no "afterlife" and the other things that go with the Epicurean worldview), then you're in a position to understand your basic place in the universe and the general direction you should be heading. And at that point you're equipped to identify and call in all the appropriate "therapeutic techniques" that might help someone in your personal situation to work through your current problems and move in the direction you want to

go.

I just see the need to caution people that when they compare CBT or any "therapy" to Epicurean philosophy there's a hazard of making the mistake of comparing apples to oranges - they are very different things. To me, it would never make any sense to engage in any "therapy" without first having an idea of the meaning of "health" and where you need to be. That's what Epicurean philosophy provides -- an understanding of "health." Once you have that only then are you in a position to judge what particular medicine a particular person needs at a particular moment.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 4, 2022 at 8:07 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I think a kind of "therapy" can come out of a worldview -- which for Epicureanism is enjoyment of life and friendships which support the enjoyment of life.

And this is something that I want to blog and post about in the future - as I feel there are many therapeutic aspects within Epicureanism.

Especially this link is good, lots of good points of "therapeutic" value:

Post

[RE: A Post At Facebook Relevant to Activism And Living As An Epicurean](#)

[...]

I think sometimes we might get caught up in the notion of philosophy involving only mental exercise: study and discussion, thoughts on how to apply a hedonic calculus (or a "virtue calculus" for the Stoics), mind-focused meditation practices (and practices to "condition the mind," as Nate says), etc. The physical comes up more in terms of food and drink, sometimes sex, maybe taking a walk in nature.

But physical exercise can be free (unconditioned) in practice -- and as a practice. Socrates...



Pacatus

May 2, 2022 at 1:48 PM

Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2022 at 8:57 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I think a kind of "therapy" can come out of a worldview -- which for Epicureanism is enjoyment of life and friendships which support the enjoyment of life.

Since we are trying to drill down and be as precise as possible, and I have spent years seeing people be obtuse about this and confuse the end and the means, let me reword that syntax to be absolutely clear which is the worldview and which is the therapy:

Quote

I think out of the Epicurean worldview - which is a view of the nature of the universe that is entirely devoid of supernatural aspects, a view of the nature of knowledge that conveys what can be expected of it and how it is acquired, and a view of the nature of a proper ethics that is not absolute but based on pleasure as the guide of life -- can come a kind of "therapy" -- which includes the pursuit of compatible friends, living prudently, studying nature, communicating with frankness, weighing pleasures and pains arising from each choice and avoidance, and maintaining proper attitudes toward "divinity" - among many other things!

Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2022 at 9:04 AM

It would be nice to collect some pithy sayings that illustrate this point -- to the effect that

"If you're not sure where you're going, you can't get there simply by walking faster!"

There must be millions of sayings that illustrate how doubling down on current activities - or just "fine-tuning" them or "getting therapy" for them is a dead end.

Something about the definition of insanity being doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result? 😊

Post by “reneliza” of May 4, 2022 at 10:31 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think that's the first way you have to understand Epicurus. When he says things to the effect that "pleasure is the goal of life" he's contrasting that conclusion to (1), (2), or (3) above. He's not prescribing a medication or giving precise clinical advice for particular person to follow at a particular moment.

I would take for granted that those three should be rejected (although it's clear that others don't think the same.) I hold reason in high regard, but I can't imagine how it could be an end instead of a tool.

If I'd been asked a week ago "What is the goal of human life?" I would've said something like "to live as much of your life as you can in support of your values" but my "values" which I talk about a lot are unrelated to the Stoic virtues (for one, they're individual - like playing with my family and creating - and probably would be more closely related to Epicurean desires) Drilling down to *why* living according to my values was the goal, I would've probably ended on "because those are the things that make me happy"

Post by “reneliza” of May 4, 2022 at 10:35 AM

I've realized through this discussion that between Epicureanism and neuroscience there's a whole lot of interesting questions about the function of the senses.

Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2022 at 11:03 AM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

I've realized through this discussion that between Epicureanism and neuroscience there's a whole lot of interesting questions about the function of the senses.

And there's this constant crossover between the observation of "how they function" as opposed to drawing conclusions from those observations.

That's of course a deep philosophical discussion in itself, but I think it's worth noting that no matter how much progress we make in unwinding the "how" in terms of the biological or electrical or whatever processes we dig into, there's always another level of "how" that goes deeper than our current understanding.

I say that to emphasize that a lot of people seem to think that just by peeling back another layer of the "how" we'll be making a lot of progress when we observe a deeper level (there is some really good material in Frances Wright on this issue). And in a sense new observation does generally help us, but no matter how far we dig into the "how" we're always going to have to make some higher-level conclusions about our "world-view" with less information than we would like to have. We would "live" to be omniscient and know everything about everything, but we never will.

We therefore have to be intelligent about what we can expect to know, and what attitude to take toward the uncertainties, and that is where Epicurus takes a very different approach from most others. And I think it's there at that level that Epicurus plants his flag as "Pleasure" - which is very necessary and helpful as a flag and a high-level view, but which shouldn't be confused with a clinical description or prescription for a "pill" to take at a particular moment. Because Epicurus might well listen to a person's story and their particular set of problems and prescribe something that leads first to "Pain" before only later leading to "Pleasure."

I think I'm beating the proverbial dead horse now but I've seen this issue arise over and over and over and I think it helps to nail it down early in the study of Epicurus.

Those who come to Epicurus looking for immediate Pleasure will be disappointed if they find out (as many of them will) that they will be required to undergo the Pain that will come from putting aside deeply-held errors about the way the world works.

Post by “reneliza” of May 4, 2022 at 12:41 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from reneliza](#)

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Oh I completely agree - I don't mean the simple electrochemical and mechanical function, but more how that impacts our understanding of what is sensation and where the line is drawn between sensation and cognition (with regard to the understanding that the senses are truly reported but may be misinterpreted) and how they both interact to bring pleasure or pain.

I mean there's the obvious clichés like the experience box but I think there are a lot of deeper questions to ask given that we don't observe the world /directly/ (tbh I can't even conceive of what that would mean) but through the filter of our senses (in the sense that there are frequencies we can't hear or see and individual variation in sensitivity, but also that the horse we see is "reported" to our brain as a stream of neurochemicals meant to represent the shapes and colors that make up a horse)

None of this to imply that we SHOULDN'T trust our senses, because we obviously should. Without that we have absolutely no basis in how to choose our actions. I think there are answers to these questions that relate directly not only to what we know and what is real, but also to how to accomplish the goal of reducing pain and enhancing pleasure.

Further on the topic of uncertainties: I always said that the reason I chose to major in neuroscience was that so often when questions were asked in class, the answer was hands spread wide, "we don't know." I have work to do with learning to deal with uncertainty in daily living but I have no problems with it in my general understanding.

Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2022 at 12:58 PM

I forgot a couple of very basic points that I should have included in what I posted earlier in this thread:

Maybe the most important aspect of the value of Epicurean philosophy is that it addresses the question of whether living happily is even *possible*!

If you believe that an arbitrary and capricious god is lurking behind every corner to punish you, then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you believe that you're going to burn in hell, or miss out on heaven, depending on whether you follow an arbitrary set of rules that you can't really live up to, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you think there are absolute standards written in the stars to which you have to conform, but don't want to conform to, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you think that there is a "Fate" the guarantees that you're going to be unhappy, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you think that your mind is a billiard ball and that every thought and action you take have been predetermined from the beginning of time, and that nothing you choose to do yourself can have any impact on your future to change it for the better, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you think that the atomic flux moves so fast that there's no way you can ever grasp with confidence anything going on around you, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you think that your senses are hopelessly inadequate to the task of determining anything with confidence, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you think that no knowledge of any kind is possible on any subject, no matter how close to you or important to you, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

If you think that pain is such a huge part of normal life that it overwhelms you, and that the best you can do is grasp scraps of happiness that last for only moments amid long expanses of agony, then then it is not going to be possible for you to live as happily as you could otherwise.

I bet I have missed some big ones in that list, but that's why we start at the principles of the "Epicurean Worldview" and then move to applications of these principles to our individual circumstances.

To close out this post we need to remember too that "possible" does not mean "guaranteed." It's also possible in life that you get struck by lightning, or a meteor, or a drunk driver, or cancer -- there are many things that are in fact beyond your control, so it is not in the power of any philosophy - even Epicurus - to *guarantee* a long and happy life.

But better by far than any other worldview or system, I like the odds of success that come from following Epicurus' views on how to tackle the issue of happiness and go after it.

Post by "Eoghan Gardiner" of May 5, 2022 at 7:55 AM

When someone says certain pleasures are better than others I have to ask WHY? The only answer is that this certain pleasure feels better to that individual.

My point is there is no objective better or worse pleasure it's all subjective to the individual. This idea of separating pleasures into higher or low, or separating pleasure from happiness is just wrong. Pleasure is the guide to happiness and happiness is feeling pleasurable.

People like to say wouldn't you prefer to read a good book rather than have an orgasm or eating a good chocolate bar as if there is some objective standard. Quite frankly I answer it depends on what I'm in the mood for. Maybe I'm being too simplistic I just don't think epicurus would have objective lists of which pleasures are better.

Enjoyment vs pleasure...how can I know if I enjoy something if it doesn't feel pleasurable. Can I use a syllogism to figure out if I enjoy something or can I just feel it?

Post by "Don" of May 5, 2022 at 8:21 AM

[Eoghan Gardiner](#) , yep!

The only caveat for readers of this forum that I'd add is that all pleasure is (a) good (feeling), *but* not all pleasure (good feeling) is choiceworthy. Context and consequences are also fundamental parts of Epicurus's philosophy. "If it feels good, do it" is Cyrenaic.

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of May 5, 2022 at 8:28 AM

[Don](#) Yeah thanks for the qualification!

Post by “Cassius” of May 5, 2022 at 9:11 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The only caveat for readers of this forum that I'd add is that all pleasure is (a) good (feeling), *but* not all pleasure (good feeling) is choiceworthy.

Yes. The issue that some people still stumble over, despite the clarity of that sentence, is that "choiceworthy" is not an objective standard either. Phrasing with words like "worthy" rings of Stoic / absolute flavor, but only the person having the experience can decide whether it is choiceworthy - whether the pleasure that will be obtained is worth the pain that will be required. We can make generalizations and predictions about consequences, but there's no supernatural or objective standard that tells everyone to make the same decision. One man's trash is another man's treasure.

[Quote from Don](#)

Context and consequences are also fundamental parts of Epicurus's philosophy.

And that's the reason only the the person experiencing the pain or pleasure is in a position to make the decision on how to choose between actions.

[Quote from Don](#)

"If it feels good, do it" is Cyrenaic.

I have to wonder if even the Cyrenaics were so short-sighted. Wish we had more texts from them too.

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of May 5, 2022 at 10:28 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

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I have to wonder if even the Cyrenaics were so short-sighted. Wish we had more texts from them too.

I have to wonder too. I've lived that lifestyle it just eventually leads to a lot of pain.

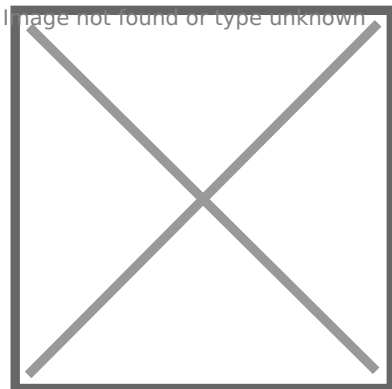
Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2022 at 10:38 AM

[Quote from Eoghan Gardiner](#)

I have to wonder too. I've lived that lifestyle it just eventually leads to a lot of pain.

And whenever a person or group is represented by a prevailing majority as having a position that seems so counterintuitive as to be apparently impossible for a sane person to believe, I tend to want to look more closely to see if the fault is in the accused, or the accuser! 😊

Post by "Don" of May 5, 2022 at 10:47 AM



[Epicurean versus Cyrenaic happiness](#)

Epicurean versus Cyrenaic happiness

www.academia.edu

Here's a Sedley paper on that topic.

Quote

Aristippus...advised people not to pain themselves either in memory of what is past or in anticipation of future events (μήτε τοῖς παρελθοῦσιν ἐπικάμνειν μήτε τῶν ἐπιόντων προκάμνειν)...His advice was to keep one's thought focused on the day, and in fact on that part of the day in which one was carrying out this or that action or thought. For only the present is ours, he said, unlike what is already over and what is still awaited, of which the former has perished, while with the latter it is unclear whether it will be.

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2022 at 12:41 PM

If that truly expresses his full view then he was truly an idiot, so I wonder what else he held to explain how he himself lived long enough to be remembered as a philosopher. Perhaps some expansive view of what it means to focus on the present moment.

I don't recall that his memory includes him being a supreme hypocrite(?)

Post by "Joshua" of May 5, 2022 at 1:53 PM

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,

Old Time is still a-flying;

And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow will be dying.

-Robert Herrick, *To the Virgins to Make Much of Time*

Had we but world enough and time,

This coyness, lady, were no crime.

-Andrew Marvell, *To his Coy Mistress*

carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.

Seize the present; trust tomorrow e'en as little as you may.

-Horace, *Odes*

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 5, 2022 at 2:20 PM

It takes a balance. I might have already posted this before, but this is very good in that it shows that happiness is both short term and long term -- "the riddle of experience vs. memory".

Quote

“We live and experience many moments, but most of them are not preserved,” Kahneman said. “They are lost forever. Our memory collects certain parts of what happened to us and processes them into a story. We make most of our decisions based on the story told by our memory.

[Read the article](#)

Watch a Ted talk:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=XgRlrBI-7Yg&vl=en>

Post by “Don” of May 5, 2022 at 2:53 PM

Well put, [Joshua](#) .

I get the impression that the Cyrenaics felt that the only pleasure worth considering was the one you're experiencing *right now.* There's some nuance to that statement, but, by and large, that seems to be their position. In the immortal words of Janis Joplin, "get it while you can!"

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2452-atlantic-article-about-enjoyment-vs-pleasure/>

Epicurus's philosophy was a direct repudiation of the cyrenaic position in that he advocated taking pleasure in past pleasures as well as looking forward to future pleasures and mental pleasure like this was worthwhile. According to the Cyrenaics, physical pleasure experienced here right now is the only worthwhile pleasure, the only pleasure you're sure of. Mental pleasure -pleasure experienced only in the mind as memory or anticipation - doesn't count.