

Is pleasure as the natural goal of life falsifiable?

Post by “waterholic” of December 8, 2022 at 6:08 AM

I have a nephew who tends towards stoicism. A lot of talk about virtue.

As an alternative, I gradually introduce the Epicurean notions. The big hurdle for him is to accept that pleasure can be a valid natural goal.

Many components of Epicurean thought are logically weaved into a consistent framework. But this framework has its axioms and unless I am mistaken, pleasure as a goal in life is a critical one.

If I require my nephew to accept that "pleasure is the valid natural goal in life", I would need to provide a falsifiability test: is there a hypothetical argument that if proven correct, my statement would be false?

I treat religion with the same approach: is there anything that I can demonstrate that would make you accept that your god does not exist? If there isn't, you are in the realm of blind faith and the discussion is pointless (the Popper approach).

Is there such a test for an Epicurean assertion that pleasure is the goal? Should I look for such a critical approach to the philosophy that best defines me as a person?

PS: I can't say that this question bothers me in terms of changing my own opinions. We are a product of evolution, which means by chance we have developed the pleasure/pain chemical reactions that guide us, so I accept it as a fact of evolutionary joke - same way as I have a nose. Still, this may not be enough.

Post by “Cassius” of December 8, 2022 at 6:38 AM

Good to hear from you waterholic and this is a very interesting question that it would be good to see if others have suggestions. But first, it seems to me that if you are looking for an abstract syllogistic / logical proof that pleasure is the goal of life, Torquatus would tell you that while some Epicureans (including Torquatus himself) might accept that as a proper approach, that Epicurus himself did not:

Quote

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?

[31] There are however some of our own school, who want to state these principles with greater refinement, and who say that it is not enough to leave the question of good or evil to the decision of sense, but that thought and reasoning also enable us to understand both that pleasure in itself is matter for desire and that pain is in itself matter for aversion. So they say that there lies in our minds a kind of natural and inbred conception leading us to feel that the one thing is ~~bet~~ for us to seek, the other to reject. Others again, with whom I agree, finding that many arguments are alleged by philosophers to prove that pleasure is not to be reckoned among things good nor pain among things evil, judge that we ought not to be too confident about our case, and think that we should lead proof and argue carefully and carry on the debate about pleasure and pain by using the most elaborate reasonings.

My view would be that Epicurus rather than Torquatus was right, and that we need to keep in mind strict limitations on what we can hope to accomplish by abstract logic. Any proofs that we are going to find convincing are going to be direct appeals to evidence that we ourselves can feel (rather than identify abstractly apart from feeling).

Post by “Joshua” of December 8, 2022 at 7:18 AM

Edit--ok, clearly Cassius and I are of one mind! 😊

My answer is a hard no.

There is no possible claim about what constitutes the proper end of life that meets a test of falsifiability, in part because of an observation made by David Hume.

Quote

The is-ought problem...is the thesis that, if a reasoner only has access to non-moral and non-evaluative factual premises, the reasoner cannot logically infer the truth of moral statements.

Applying this to the pleasure principle, I might think I'm on solid ground by starting things out this way:

"Every living thing, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and recoils from pain." Starting with that, what would it take for us to get to this? "We ought to live our own lives like this, pursuing pleasure as the goal of our lives and avoiding pain as much as we can."

What we're missing is at least one extra premise; something to go between those two statements to connect them in some logical way. But this doesn't give us an objective truth about the proper end of life--it just gives us another argument from logic. What Epicurus actually does with regard to the two statements above (adapted from the Torquatus material) is to offer a non-logical approach.

Epicurus sets out to show this as follows: Every living thing, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure, and delights in it as its chief good. It also recoils from pain as its chief evil, and avoids pain so far as is possible. Nature's own unbiased and honest judgment leads every living thing to do this from birth, and it continues to do this as long as it remains uncorrupted. Epicurus refuses to admit any need for discussion to prove that pleasure is to be desired and pain is to be avoided, because these facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, in the same way that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey is sweet. None of these things need be proved by elaborate argument — it is enough merely to draw attention to them. For there is a difference, he holds, between a formal logical proof of a thing, and a mere notice or reminder. Logical proofs are the method for discovering abstract and difficult truths, but on the other hand a mere notice is all that is required for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.

Post by “Cassius” of December 8, 2022 at 7:36 AM

Just in case anyone is not aware of this section of Diogenes Laertius, this too would be relevant to the central question, which is lesser role that Epicurus gave to the use of abstract / dialectical logic in the determination of truth:

Quote

Logic they reject as misleading. For they say it is sufficient for physicists to be guided by what things say of themselves. Thus in The Canon Epicurus says that the tests of truth are the sensations and concepts [preconceptions / anticipations] and the feelings; the Epicureans add to these the intuitive apprehensions of the mind. And this he says himself too in the summary addressed to Herodotus and in the [Principal Doctrines](#). For, he says, all sensation is irrational and does not admit of memory; for it is not set in motion by itself, nor when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it. Nor is there anything which can refute the sensations. For a similar sensation cannot refute a similar because it is equivalent in validity, nor a dissimilar a dissimilar, for the objects of which they are the criteria are not the same; nor again can reason, for all reason is dependent upon sensations; nor can one sensation refute another, for we attend to them all alike. Again, the fact of apperception confirms the truth of the sensations. And seeing and hearing are as much facts as feeling pain. From this it follows that as regards the imperceptible we must draw inferences from phenomena. For all thoughts have their origin in sensations by means of coincidence and analogy and similarity and combination, reasoning too contributing something.

Post by “Cassius” of December 8, 2022 at 7:40 AM

Also so as to be clear for others reading, what it seems Epicurus would reject is this question in itself -

[Quote from waterholic](#)

If I require my nephew to accept that "pleasure is the valid natural goal in life", I would need to provide a falsifiability test: is there a hypothetical argument that if proven correct, my statement would be false?

As best I can determine Epicurus would say that you indeed "would not need" to provide any abstract logical proof at all, because logical proof tests are not the tests of human reality. The tests applicable to human reality are the perceptions we receive from the sensations, anticipations, and feelings, which we accept as the basis for all our reasoning. All validation

tests are judged using those, not using "logical" word proofs. Words are tools just like virtue or hammers are tools, and they are very useful but limited, and they are not truth in themselves.

Post by “Cassius” of December 8, 2022 at 7:47 AM

Also I think this is one area where later Epicureans went wrong in deviating from Epicurus. They should have stuck to Epicurus' original insight and contention that logical word games are not the proper test of truth.

Or, at the very least, if they decided to engage in those logical word games they should have been rigorously clear that those word games were just that - word games with strictly limited usefulness.

And in fact perhaps they did make that distinction, but in relaying them through later years the limitations and qualifications were dropped from the discussion by later carriers who did not appreciate the importance of those limitations. Given Cicero's hostility to Epicurus he might well have been an example of someone who would cherry-pick from the discussions to leave the logical debates while deleting the limitations in which they were framed. In Cicero's case it seems that he at least preserved that Epicurus had objected to logical proofs in this area, but he had to add in his own editorial commentary that he himself (speaking through Torquatus) agreed with the need for logical proofs.

Post by “waterholic” of December 8, 2022 at 8:15 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

My view would be that Epicurus rather than Torquatus was right, and that we need to keep in mind strict limitations on what we can hope to accomplish by abstract logic.

Thank you Cassius, very handy summary of the views on this question. Without knowing the background, I was indeed tending towards accepting this as just observation (same as "I have a nose" - no need to give logical arguments). So one part of the question is: should we need logical argumentation, the other - what that argumentation should be.

Post by “waterholic” of December 8, 2022 at 8:23 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As best I can determine Epicurus would say that you indeed "would not need" to provide any abstract logical proof at all, because logical proof tests are not the tests of human reality. The tests applicable to human reality are the perceptions we receive from the sensations, anticipations, and feelings, which we accept as the basis for all our reasoning.

But couldn't the same approach be applied to Gods? I don't see or touch pleasure, in the same way I don't see or touch Gods. Yet, I feel it. Who is to say that someone doesn't feel God, ergo she is as right as I am?

Post by “waterholic” of December 8, 2022 at 9:17 AM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Nature's own unbiased and honest judgment leads every living thing to do this from birth, and it continues to do this as long as it remains uncorrupted. Epicurus refuses to admit any need for discussion to prove that pleasure is to be desired and pain is to be avoided, because these facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, in the same way that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey is sweet. None of these things need be proved by elaborate argument — it is enough merely to draw attention to them.

Thank you [Joshua](#), a very interesting paragraph. The part "Nature's own ...judgement" from my vantage point refers to evolution, meaning we are just naturally built that way. But we are also naturally built to care for children, family, animals, and often at detriment to ourselves.

Trying to unpack (**and please correct my thinking here**) - in the process of evolution my species (as it is now) survived out of all possible random variations due to the balance it strikes in its design between caring for others and caring for self. This is not a divine intervention or a sign of superiority of humans. It's just a fact of evolution that our particular balance between selfishness and altruism happens to produce a more survivable species.

What this implies is that I am designed in a way that this balance is a natural state for me. In a simple example, if I am about to die, have only 3 minutes left and have an option for a great pleasure at the cost of great pain (possibly life) of another, it would be consistent with the

Epicurean pleasure/pain calculus to forego the pleasure, because in those minutes the knowledge of harm to another would cause us pain. Why? Because we are built that way and we don't need virtue, belief in afterlife punishment or diety to act that way.

Any thoughts?

Post by "Cassius" of December 8, 2022 at 9:55 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

But couldnt the same approach be applied to Gods? I don't see or touch pleasure, in the same way I don't see or touch Gods. Yet, I feel it. Who is to say that someone doesn't feel God, ergo she is as right as I am?

Who is to say? That answer I think would be just like any other question, and only you can answer it by evaluating the evidence that is available to you and making the best decision that is possible to you.

If someone tells me that they have direct evidence of God then I tell them I am from Missouri and I ask them to "show me." If they can't, then I place their claim in the category of many other claims that are made without evidence that I can verify or have good reason to accept, and which I therefore reject.

That's something I think Epicurus was trying to be clear about: There ultimately is no "final arbiter" of right and wrong. There is no center of the universe to stand in and say that this perspective alone is the "right" perspective. There is no divine god or anyone else who knows everything and can say "this alone" is right. There is no realm of forms or essences -- no "true world" outside of our own to which to look to as authority. This is not reason for despair but reason to saddle up and get back on the horse and ride life as aggressively as you can to manage all the evidence and all the decisions available to you.

[Quote from waterholic](#)

What this implies is that I am designed in a way that this balance is a natural state for me. In a simple example, if I am about to die, have only 3 minutes left and have an option for a great pleasure at the cost of great pain (possibly life) of another, it would be consistent with the Epicurean pleasure/pain calculus to forego the pleasure, because in those minutes the knowledge of harm to another would cause us pain. Why? Because we are built that way and we don't need virtue, belief in afterlife punishment

or diety to act that way.

I think I am agreeing with your example, but only because ultimately it comes down to "you have to determine yourself what is the most pleasurable course for you given all your mental and physical reactions." When you say "because we are built that way" I sense that you are wanting to look for an absolute answer that says for everyone that "altruism" or "the interests of others" are always to be chosen over "selfishness" or "your own interests." I don't think the facts or Epicurus lead in that direction and I would urge people away from that conclusion, or any other conclusion that implies that there is a "universal good" other than the fact that living beings have faculties of pleasure and pain.

And to carry that last point to a conclusion, I don't think Epicurus was a Benthamite and suggested that pleasure is out there floating in the air and that we should try to maximize "pleasure in general" or "the pleasure of everyone" no matter who is feeling it.

I think Epicurus is clear that each individual has to make that decision for themselves and decide what pleasure and pain is relevant to them. We can choose to be "Mother Theresa" and say that the pleasure of everyone in the world, or any stranger, is every bit as important to god (and to me) as the pleasure of my own spouse and children. Or we can choose to be much more limited and say that in the end the pleasure of our families and friends and ourselves is paramount. But either way, neither god nor platonic forms nor essences nor absolute justice nor anything else exists to justify the conclusion that one "must" or even "should" be selected one over the other. In the end most people seem to end up looking to what nature puts in them - which I gather to be stronger feelings for that which is close and less strong feelings for that which is distant.

Post by “waterholic” of December 8, 2022 at 10:29 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

because we are built that way" I sense that you are wanting to look for an absolute answer that says for everyone that "altruism" or "the interests of others" are always to be chosen over "selfishness" or "your own interests."

To clarify my thought here, what I mean is if you collect a set of humans, on the average, they would show certain average balance between being Mother Theresa and being selfish. Of course, there is no absolute correct/incorrect or a moral judgement that altruism is better than selfishness. But we tend to cluster in an area (central limit in stats), which is an outcome of evolution. That balance is an evolutionary random outcome and is subject to constant change

as well.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 8, 2022 at 7:24 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Spot on!

I want to add that, in modern terms, deductive (“abstract”?) logic does not yield empirical truth – only coherency. (The opposite of “logical” in the deductive sense is not “false” but incoherent.)

Inductive logic (to my mind) yields no *absolute* empirical truths – but reliable probabilities (some of which may veer toward certainty in a subjective sense, even if not in terms of some strict objective “absolutism”).

We live in the empirical (experiential) world, and we have to rely on the evidence of our senses and reasoned induction therefrom – even informally, which is how we mostly go about it. That’s not a “problem” – certainly not one that can be “solved” by unquestioning “faith”. Or abstract logic.

In more metaphorical terms: we lay our bets as best we can. And keep going – as Cassius said: “saddle up and get back on the horse and ride life as aggressively as you can to manage all the evidence and all the decisions available to you.”

And that is my basis for agreeing with [Joshua](#) 's “hard no” (with his reference to Hume) as well. And is the only way I use that word “faith” – the best effective confidence I can muster in order to act in a real world where “abstract certainty” is not forthcoming. But absence of “abstract absolute certainty” is not the same as absence of reliable evidence.

And if someone thinks their evidence is more reliable than what now have, then “Show me.” I'll look.

Post by “Matteng” of February 4, 2023 at 10:26 AM

Some Ideas from my side (I often change between the stoic / epicurean perspective)

In Epicurean Philosophy virtue and pleasure are bound together.

Is the opposite falsifiable ? Or is virtue alone distinct from pleasure a better goal for life ?

That could be if a Stoic can proof me this thesis:

"Is there virtue or a virtuous act which brings in the short and long run no pleasure and no reduction of any pain ?"

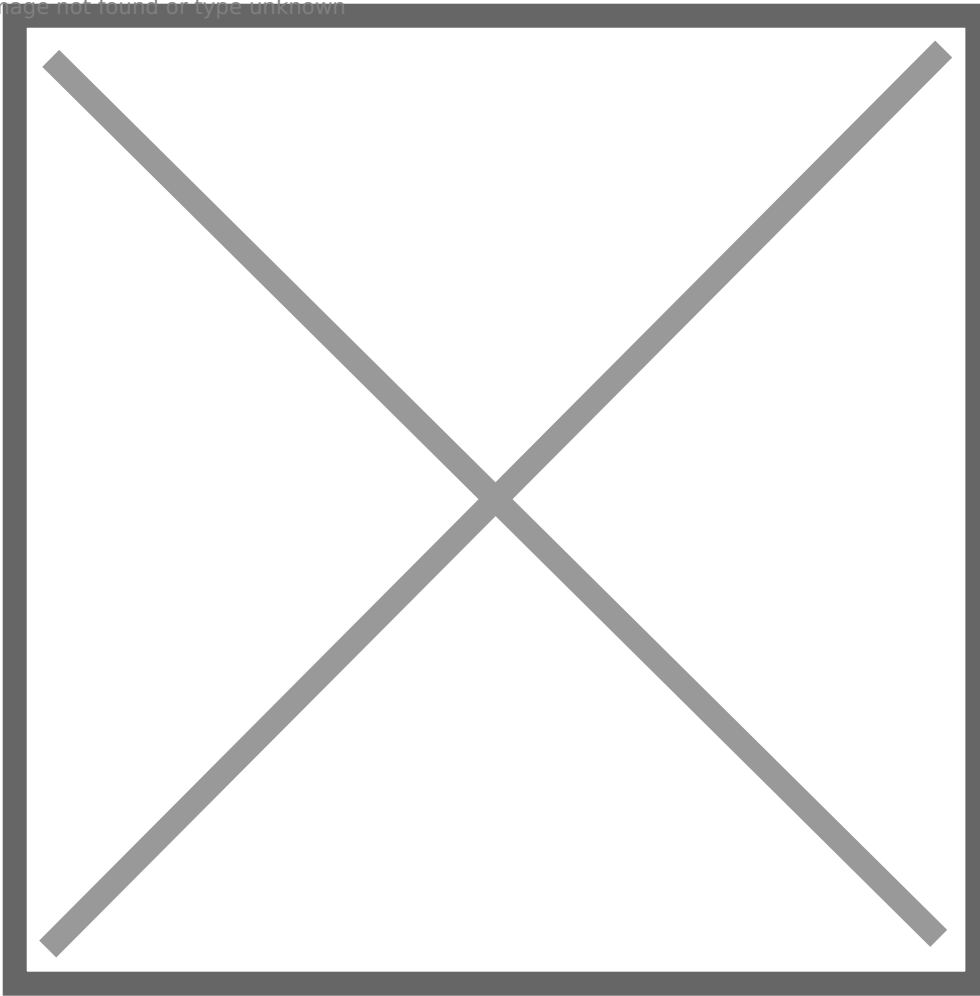
Another question: Is there anywhere a table/summary for defense of pleasure as a goal of life ?

(I know for Epicurus this statement was obvious but even that is a statement and it seems for not clear / obvious for some other philosophies).

So where go these philosophy wrong and why (especially the Stoics ? In the naturalist philosophies they are the closest competitor I think).

Here are some summarized attacks on this goal (pleasure):

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[Stoic Arguments Against Hedonism](#)

Some notes on hedonism and the ancient criticisms made of it by Stoics and others.

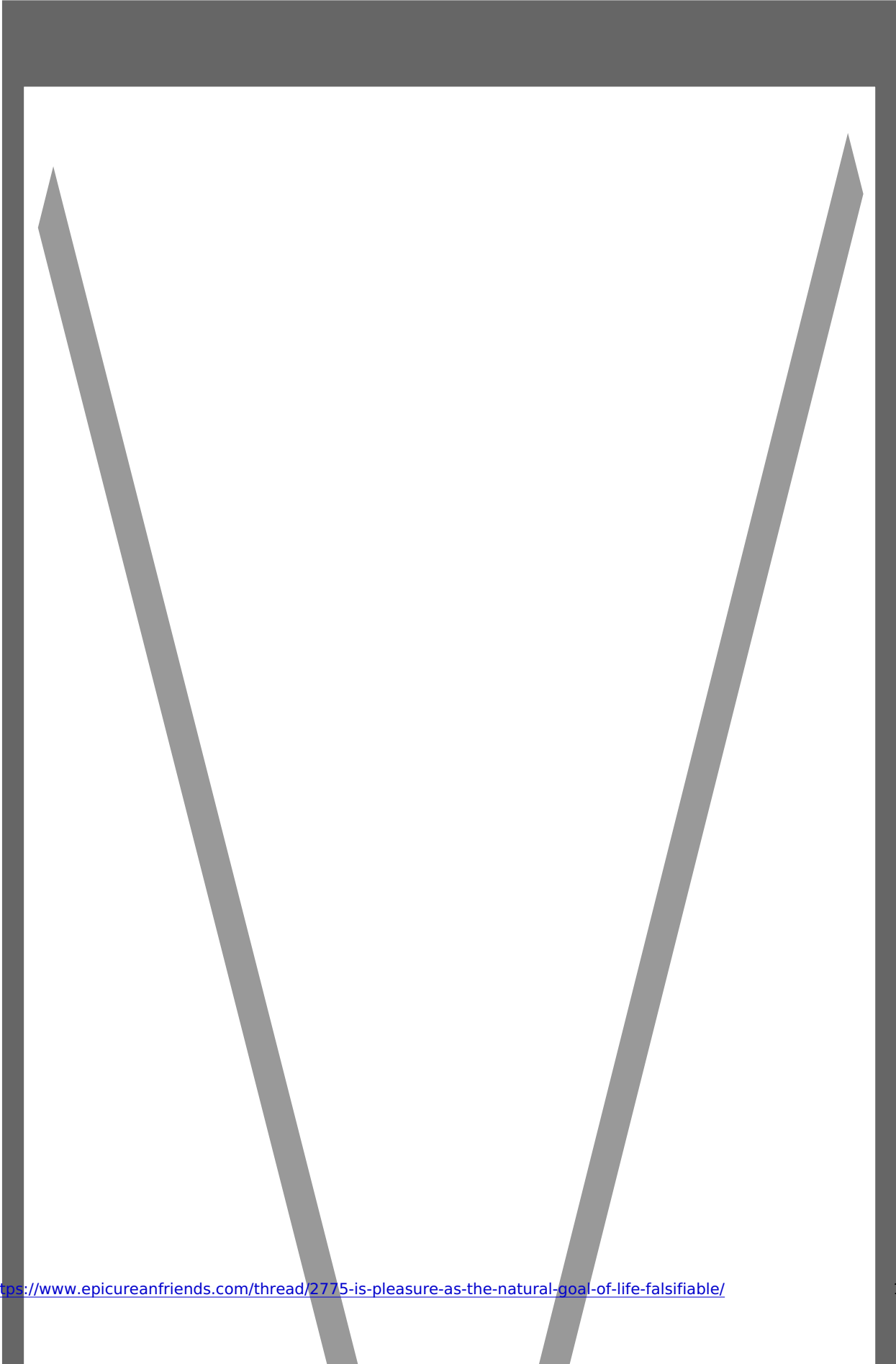
donaldrbertson.name

[Virtue is its own Reward](#)

The Stoic doctrine that "virtue is its own reward".

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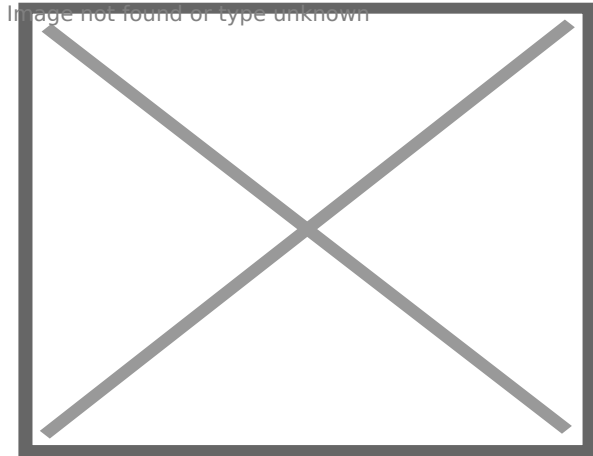
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[What Seneca Really Said about Epicureanism](#)

Survey of Seneca's remarks about Epicurus in the Letters to Lucilius, and elsewhere.

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[Epictetus: Stoicism versus Epicureanism](#)

Article outlining the criticisms of Epicureanism made by the Stoic Epictetus.

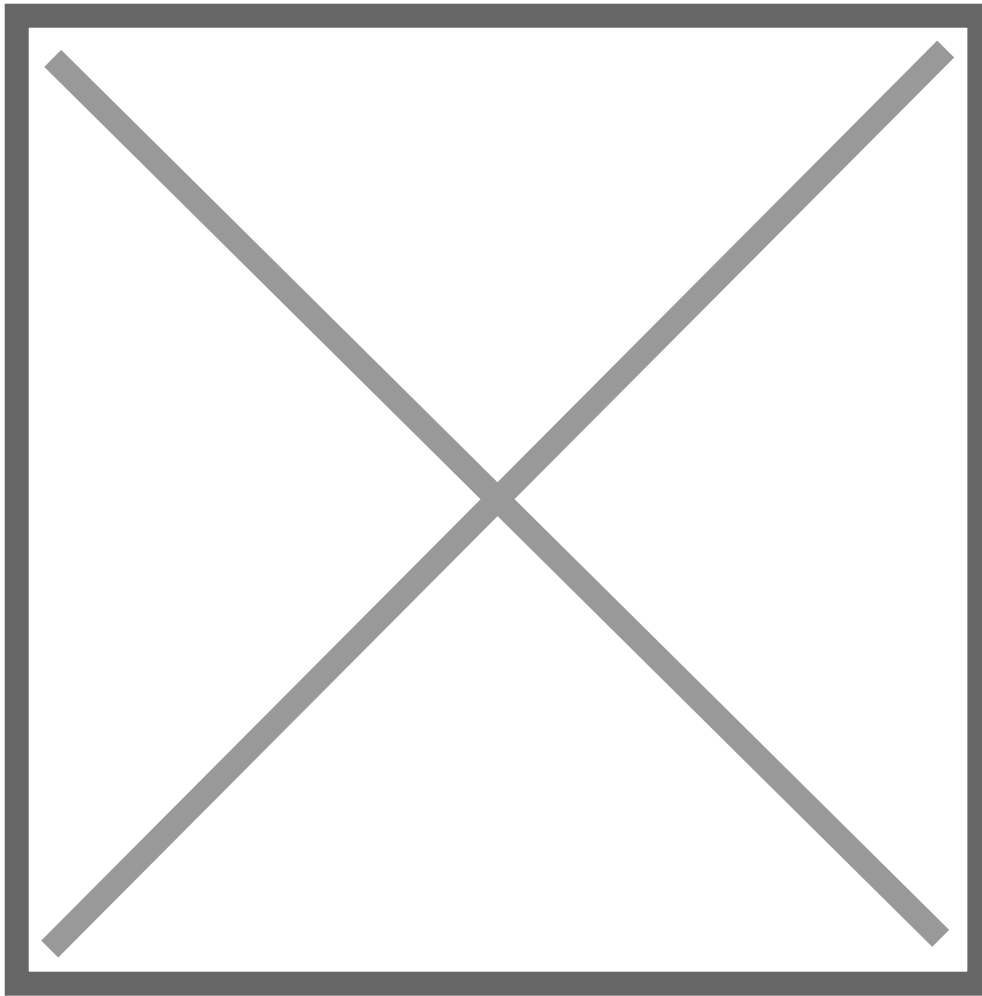
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By the way does this book from Chrysippus still exist or does anyone know the content or the arguments made there ?

Quote

The Stoics defined the goal of life as the attainment of wisdom and virtue. They frequently contrasted this with the common notion that pleasure (*hedone*) is the most important thing in life. Indeed, Chrysippus wrote one book entitled *Proofs that Pleasure is not the End-in-chief of Action* and another on *Proofs that Pleasure is not a Good*, i.e., pleasure is not intrinsically good at all let alone the supreme goal of life.

from:



[Stoic Arguments Against Hedonism](#)

Some notes on hedonism and the ancient criticisms made of it by Stoics and others.
donaldrobertson.name

Stoics advocate more "joy" instead of "pleasure" (only for the wise attainable according to the Stoics), what was there the greek term? For pleasure it is "hedone".

Post by "Cassius" of February 4, 2023 at 12:18 PM

Matteng your post led me back to the Wikipedia on Falsifiability:

Quote

Falsifiability is a [deductive](#) standard of evaluation of scientific theories and hypotheses that was introduced by the [philosopher of science Karl Popper](#) in his book [The Logic of Scientific Discovery](#) (1934).^[B] He proposed it as the cornerstone solution to both the [problem of induction](#) and the [problem of demarcation](#).

A [theory](#) or [hypothesis](#) is **falsifiable** (or **refutable**) if it can be *logically* contradicted by an [empirical test](#) using existing technologies. Popper insisted that, as a logical criterion, falsifiability is distinct from the related concept "capacity to be proven wrong" discussed in [Lakatos' falsificationism](#).^{[C][D]} Even being a logical criterion, its purpose is to make the theory [predictive](#) and [testable](#), and thus useful in practice.

Popper opposed falsifiability to the intuitively similar concept of [verifiability](#) that was then current in [logical positivism](#). His argument goes that the only way to verify a claim such as "All swans are white" would be if one could theoretically observe all swans,^[E] which is not possible. Instead, falsifiability searches for the anomalous instance, such that observing a single black swan is theoretically reasonable and sufficient to logically falsify the claim. On the other hand, the [Duhem-Quine thesis](#) says that definitive experimental falsifications are impossible^[1] and that no scientific hypothesis is by itself capable of making predictions, because an [empirical](#) test of the hypothesis requires one or more background assumptions.^[2]

Are you thinking that there is anything in that Stoic material that gets to the issue of falsifiability of the Epicurean position? Or of the link between virtue and pleasure that Epicurus states? While there is a link Epicurus is very clear that virtue is a tool for pleasure and not an end in itself.

If you are not familiar with The Torquatus position in On Ends, and the statement of Diogenes of Oinoanda in Fragment I think you would find those interesting:

[Torquatus on Virtue vs Pleasure](#)

[Diogenes Fragment 32](#)

Post by “waterholic” of February 5, 2023 at 10:24 AM

[Matteng](#) after I posted this question, and helped by kind contributions from [Cassius](#), [Joshua](#) and [Pacatus](#) I arrived at the following thought process, which might be helpful:

1. There is nothing outside the material world (Epicurean atomism), so there is no way for us to observe or experience virtue. One cannot accept as a goal in life something that cannot be tested, observed or defined.
 2. We can observe that humans (even newly born) are attracted to pleasure (e.g. bread for a hungry person) and try to avoid pain. Like most things in Epicurean philosophy, this is based on observation and is perfectly testable.
 3. The broader interpretation of pleasure by Epicurus and followers (pleasure of friendship, knowledge, tranquility etc.) explain how this goal does not result in a society breaking down into selfish individuals.
 4. Finally, when we observe and understand evolution by natural selection, it becomes clear that pleasure and pain are random chemical mechanisms that have developed by chance but have proven to be an effective set of guiding principles for complex animals like us. What we call virtue, on the other hand, is just a behavioural pattern condoned by a group, which may or may not have been based on a real benefit to the group at some time in the past or in present.
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Post by “Little Rocker” of February 5, 2023 at 4:18 PM

Late to this conversation, but there do seem to be some people who try to argue that psychological hedonism is empirically falsifiable by establishing empirically that altruism is possible (with the buried assumption that if possible, altruism is good and recommended). I have been as yet unconvinced, but the main people trying to establish this from a psychological perspective are Daniel Batson and (more recently) [Paul Bloom](#). In the Philosophy Bites interview with Bloom, the blunt British hosts sort of reassert that it's not falsifiable.

Post by “A_Gardner” of February 7, 2023 at 12:51 PM

I am late to this conversation as well, but it does contain some ideas I have been reflecting on recently that I wish to share and welcome the input of others!

As of late, I have actually been implementing more Stoic teachings and practices in my life, so the question of pleasure being the sole goal of life (and if it's falsifiable) has crossed my mind. As of now, I can say as others have, that **it is not falsifiable**. As rule of judgment goes, it is not my place to judge another individuals pursuits as far as they cause no harm to myself or

others. The Epicurean goal of pleasure (as defined in his teachings) is in fact a most noble life pursuit in my opinion.

I can also attest to the argument that living creatures naturally want pleasure and actively pursue it, while trying to avoid pain. Even the Stoic school has preferred indifferents!

That said, an argument against propping up pleasure as the only good in life, is that it can lead to more states of psychological unrest, as pleasure is never a guaranteed and we often faces forms of hardship just as much if not more than pleasure, no matter how we may try to mitigate the pain and amplify the pleasure.

Can it be argued here that ataraxia is more difficult to obtain/ maintain when faced under the duress of pain?

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2023 at 1:18 PM

[Quote from A Gardner](#)

That said, an argument against propping up pleasure as the only good in life, is that it can lead to more states of psychological unrest, as pleasure is never a guaranteed and we often faces forms of hardship

Yes it certainly can..... and

[Quote from A Gardner](#)

Can it be argued here that ataraxia is more difficult to obtain/ maintain when faced under the duress of pain?

Yes it certainly can..... and

Both of the questions are exactly why I think it is such a terrible fallacy to accept the consensus view that "tranquility" or even "ataraxia" (which I think is best to translate into English and call it for what it is - "absence of disturbance") is the Epicurean goal of life!

Not shouting at you here but this gives me another opportunity to get out the soapbox:

Of COURSE pleasure is not guaranteed, and OF COURSE we should feel psychological unrest if we run into obstacles to pleasure that we can do something about, which is the case of many or most of them. Should we just crawl into a hole and die and say "Oh me oh my I could have been

so happy today but it's raining, and the noise outside is loud, and I have a headache which I could fix with an aspirin but i don't want to take it." You can't stop the rain but you can have fun inside; you can't fix all the noise but you can close the windows or put on mufflers; you can fix the headache with an aspirin! And if you DON'T do those things then you should thank your lucky stars that you DO have psychological unrest rather than having been made in the image of a Stoic god and being indifferent to everything!

Same answer as to absence of disturbance. If you wake up to find that you have fallen asleep on railroad tracks, or that there's a tornado bearing down on your house, you better hope that you disturbed! You better hope you are **not** "tranquil" or so "calm" that you can't muster every bit of excitement and energy and determination and even anxiety that you can muster, and get to safety as quickly as you can!

That's the problem with defining tranquility and ataraxia as the goal of life. They AREN'T. Epicurus said it correctly over and over, the goal is PLEASURE, and in the service of pleasure, which any normal human being knows requires work to obtain, you sometime accept and even choose and welcome pain, if it helps you achieve greater pleasure.

It's not Epicurus who put these advocates of "tranquility and ataraxia and absence of pain above all" people on the wrong track, in my view. It is the intentional misrepresentation - by taking out of the context of the rest of the philosophy - of a few sentences in the letter to Menoeceus. Those passages have an absolutely clear interpretation that is totally consistent with the rest of the philosophy when taken as a whole, but a series of anti-Epicureans like Cicero and Plutarch began the process of defamation by mischaracterizing Epicurus as a sluggard and a retiring wallflower who would never tolerate a moment of pain. Then - after the first generations of defamers passed away along with the remaining Epicurean texts and teachers who could explain the situation properly, another 2000 years of pro-Stoic and anti-Epicurean writers (some innocent and some not) have come along to bury the "Pleasure is the goal" message in a bunch of pro-Stoic rewriting of the original message to change its message entirely.

I am so glad you came back to make that comment, and to make it in that way!

This is the number one problem that holds back Epicurean philosophy in the world today.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2023 at 1:36 PM

For the sake of argument, let's grant for a moment that the advocates of "tranquility" as the goal of life will quickly accept what they don't grant to Epicurus - that it is sometimes necessary to embrace pain or disturbance for a few minutes - so that they can "get back on the path to

tranquility."

So such a person is going to admit that there are times when they deviate from their highest goal, for the sake of getting back on to that highest goal -- but they are going to admit that their highest goal -- in the 70 years out of eternity that they have on this earth -- their highest goal is "to be tranquil.... to be calm"?

Oh my god, if that is what they see as the best way to spend their time on this earth, then either someone needs a new dictionary on the meaning of tranquility, or someone has been tragically led astray.

And I don't think Epicurus needed a dictionary, nor was he led astray. His words, however, have been hijacked.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2023 at 1:43 PM

This is a far better description of the goal of life -- a life of pleasure lived in this way - and there is no way that the word "tranquility" or even "ataraxia" conveys this. The aspect of "absence of disturbance" is clearly focused on not brooking any interruptions to a life of pleasure pursued actively and vigorously in this way:

Quote from Torquatus from "On Ends" (Rackham)

XII. 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.

A life spent sleeping in a cave would certainly be tranquil, but it does not take an Epicurus to see that such a life would admit of a heckofa lot of improvement.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2023 at 1:55 PM

Further, the goal of life is not "the removal of pain" because "the goal of life" is defined by the philosophers to be that ultimate end for which you do everything else. Again, see Torquatus' narrative: *(IX. I will start then in the manner approved by the author of the system himself, by settling what are the essence and qualities of the thing that is the object of our inquiry; not that I suppose you to be ignorant of it, but because this is the logical method of procedure. We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil.)*

You do not "remove pain" as the ultimate goal unless you want to go ahead and die, because the only way to be ultimately sure to experience no further pain is to die. If removal of all pain is your goal, then die, as I gather Marcus Aurelius (or was it someone else?) said to or about the Christians.

In the Epicurean view you "remove pain" in order to experience pleasure. Pleasure is the ultimate goal that you pursue, and which you calculate toward in making all decisions, up to the point when you die. You don't calculate all decisions against achieving total absence of pain unless you want to go ahead and die, or wish you had never been born, both of which Epicurus expressly ridicules in the letter to Menoeceus.

Post by "A_Gardner" of February 8, 2023 at 9:28 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Not shouting at you here but this gives me another opportunity to get out the soapbox:

No worries at all. I am here to learn and as a student, so if ever my arguments have misunderstandings or seem like I am preaching them, please let me know or share the teachings!

I will have to read over your following posts in response to me (real life works keeps me busy and slow to read and respond) but I did want to clarify that I was not implying ataraxia to be the goal as set by Epicurus. My current understanding is that it is more of a "fruit" that comes from following the tree of pleasure and Epicurean teachings.

A nice potential side benefit if you will,

Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2023 at 9:42 AM

[Quote from A Gardner](#)

My current understanding is that it is more of a "fruit" that comes from following the tree of pleasure and Epicurean teachings.

Yes, a fruit, or a side benefit, or just one of many other aspects of how pleasure can be enjoyed in life. Most certainly not some special state, the achievement of which everything in life, and every other goal in life, is subordinate.

Once again it's a matter of whether the term is being used as normal people might use it. I have no issues with it in a broad or loose way, in regular conversation, or even in a technical sense if someone wants to define the best life as a jar of beans in which every last pain bean has been removed and replaced with a pleasure bean (which is what I think "the limit of pleasure" really was intended to reference). But the problem is the sense in which it is batted around in much discussion of Epicurus by professional commentators, as the be-all and end-all of life, which gives rise to the kind of question you ask such as:

"How can I do X if it will be disturbing?"

The answer to which, I would suggest, is just the way Epicurus said, that you sometimes choose pain (even the pain of disturbance) in order to achieve a greater PLEASURE. If there were no greater way to look at pleasure than "absence of disturbance" then I would agree, and why would you ever get out of bed in the morning at all?

And if someone says "But I have to get out of bed because if i don't go to work I'll be disturbed even more!" Then I would say to them "If 'being calm and undisturbed' is the best way you can think of to spend your 75 years on earth, I feel very sorry for you. You are surely a natural-born Stoic."

Post by “Don” of February 9, 2023 at 12:03 AM

As long as we're soapboxing...

I feel I should stand up for ataraxia in the face of Cassius's withering attack...

Although it may end up that we're not as far apart as it may at first seem since that seems to end up being the case on many occasions in the past. Even so...

Starting at the beginning, let me address a couple of [A Gardner](#) 's points and then [Cassius](#) 's posts.

Quote from A_Gardner

an argument against propping up pleasure as the only good in life, is that it can lead to more states of psychological unrest

No question. And Epicurus addresses this exact thing, especially in the letter to Menoikeus, in the lines about "we don't mean endless drinking parties and town festivals..." Epicurus would agree that not all pleasure should be chosen.

Quote from A_Gardner

pleasure is never a guaranteed and we often faces forms of hardship just as much if not more than pleasure, no matter how we may try to mitigate the pain and amplify the pleasure

This is where I start my advocacy for ataraxia or tranquility or calm or whatever pleasurable, stable state of mental equilibrium you want to use to translate the Greek. Epicurus is well aware we'll meet hardship. That's exactly why he advocates strengthening a quiet, calm, anxiety-free mind. That's the only pleasure we can be sure of under all circumstances - including being on the rack (although I have to agree with Emily Austin that he might be overselling here just a tad). Nonetheless, equanimity/tranquility/ataraxia is available at all times, even under duress and trying circumstances. But more on that below.

Quote from A_Gardner

Can it be argued here that ataraxia is more difficult to obtain/ maintain when faced under the duress of pain?

Of course, it's difficult. Epicurus writes to "Meditate day and night then on this and similar things by yourself as well as together with those like yourself." It's not a one and done. It takes work! That doesn't mean it's impossible.

Quote from Cassius

Of COURSE pleasure is not guaranteed, and OF COURSE we should feel psychological unrest if we run into obstacles to pleasure that we can do something about, which is the case of many or most of them. Should we just crawl into a hole and die and say "Oh

me oh my I could have been so happy today but it's raining, and the noise outside is loud, and I have a headache which I could fix with an aspirin but i don't want to take it."

I don't agree at all that "we should feel psychological unrest if we run into obstacles to pleasure that we can do something about." Yes, we can identify obstacles that we can do something about, but we need not feel "psychological unrest." I would much rather meet obstacles clear-eyed with a calm mind and assess the evidence before me that way than to feel "unrest." And the "crawl into a hole and die" is not the opposite of feeling "psychological unrest." That simply defeatism. IF we can cultivate ataraxia, we have a much better chance of making a good choice to remove, move around, or avoid the "obstacle to pleasure" than we would if we get anxious, feel "psychological unrest" or get agitated or fearful. But let's move on...

Quote from Cassius

Same answer as to absence of disturbance. If you wake up to find that you have fallen asleep on railroad tracks, or that there's a tornado bearing down on your house, you better hope that you disturbed! You better hope you are not "tranquil" or so "calm" that you can't muster every bit of excitement and energy and determination and even anxiety that you can muster, and get to safety as quickly as you can!

If I wake up "asleep on railroad tracks" or with "a tornado bearing down on (my) house" I may feel a sense of urgency but I hope I'm not "disturbed." To me, that sounds like being overwhelmed and distressed and having a mind overcome by indecision and fear. I hope I wouldn't be like that. I would hope I have cultivated enough capacity for ataraxia that I can assess the situation clear-headed, make good decisions for the safety of myself and my family, and help calm others and get everyone to a safe place to ride out the storm.

You seem to be equating ataraxia/tranquility/calm/etc. with passiveness and being a doormat or being somehow lazy or complacent. I don't get that at all. I see ataraxia as the calm center of the hurricane. Things may be swirling around you, but your mind is calm, collected, able to assess evidence clearly.

You seem to also be equating ataraxia with [apatheia](#) which is a Stoic virtue. That's the opposite of feeling emotions (per LSJ - see link). I don't get that all either.

This is one of the reasons I enjoyed Emily Austin's book so much. Her constant refrain of the freedom from anxiety allowing us to better enjoy the necessary and extravagant pleasures struck a chord with me. That is exactly my thoughts on ataraxia in Epicurus' philosophy.

Quote from Cassius

That's the problem with defining tranquility and ataraxia as the goal of life. They AREN'T. Epicurus said it correctly over and over, the goal is PLEASURE, and in the

service of pleasure, which any normal human being knows requires work to obtain, you sometime accept and even choose and welcome pain, if it helps you achieve greater pleasure.

Tranquility / ataraxia are not the "goal of life" but Epicurus stresses over and over the importance of freedom from disturbance in the mind and "pain in the body" (I have a problem with this kind of translation of aponia, but we'll leave that for another time.) There's no getting around that in the texts. And, yes, PLEASURE is the goal, and tranquility is pleasure, freedom from anxiety is pleasure, but it is pleasure that is always available to us which is why Epicurus places such importance on it - NOT exclusionary importance as the ONLY pleasure we should pursue but of significant and paramount importance to give us the possibility of the best pleasurable life possible in addition to all the other pleasures we can experience. To my reading, your Torquatus excerpt proves my point:

Quote from Torquatus from "On Ends" (Rackham)

XII. 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.

That "strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain" is exactly my understanding of what ataraxia *is* - and Torquatus places it "in the first place."

Quote

A life spent sleeping in a cave would certainly be tranquil, but it does not take an Epicurus to see that such a life would admit of a heckofa lot of improvement.

Again, "a life spent sleeping in a cave" is a straw man. My metaphor of what is meant by ataraxia / tranquility / calm is the picture of a musk ox, facing into the howling winter wind, legs braces, ice forming on its hair and face, knowing the disturbance will eventually pass ("Pain is short...") and it can then go on and paw the snow for luscious plants to eat. (Note: just a metaphor btw. Not saying musk oxen are Epicureans.)

I continue to "soapbox" that my reading of katastematic pleasures, including ataraxia, are those that arise from within ourselves and that these are the only pleasures in life that we can be confident of at all times. Epicurus includes ataraxia and aponia within the katastematic pleasures. Metrodorus stresses that these are the only ones we can be confident of:

Quote from Metrodorus

"Metrodorus, in his book *On the Source of Happiness in Ourselves being greater than that which arises from Objects*, says: 'What else is the good of the soul but the sound state of the flesh, and the sure hope of its continuance?'"

Metrodorus in his *Timocrates*, whose actual words are : "Thus pleasure being conceived both as that species which consists in motion and that which is a state of rest."

Metrodorus's quote is: νοουμένης δὲ ἡδονῆς τῆς τε κατὰ κίνησιν καὶ τῆς καταστηματικῆς. Right there, again, is κίνησιν (kinēsin) and καταστηματικῆς (katastēmatikēs). The kinetic pleasures arise from our interaction with external stimuli and phenomena. And Metrodorus stresses the importance of both kinds of pleasures, but he also wrote a book entitled "On the Source of Happiness in Ourselves being greater than that which arises from Objects." As Emily Austin writes in her book, if we're stuck in a hospital bed unable to move, the ONLY pleasures we can enjoy are those that arise from within our minds. I would include those pleasant memories within katastematic pleasures along with ataraxia. And we can't enjoy pleasant memories if our minds are disturbed with anxiety, depression, fear, or other painful mental conditions. Ataraxia *is* that calm mind that we have under our control and that is not at the whims of fears and anxiety, running wild in our heads.

Post by “waterholic” of February 9, 2023 at 1:33 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't agree at all that "we should feel psychological unrest if we run into obstacles to pleasure that we can do something about." Yes, we can identify obstacles that we can do something about, but we need not feel "psychological unrest." I would much rather meet obstacles clear-eyed with a calm mind and assess the evidence before me that way than to feel "unrest."

[Don](#) raised a major question in my untrained mind. The understanding of ataraxia in Epicurean sense in my view is different in nuance to stoics and other schools. Facing a major challenge or a headwind causes us to have a natural reaction: adrenaline, fight/flight instinct etc. In

extreme, we do feel perturbed, sad, unsettled or concerned. A stoic take on this would be: "use your jedi mind trick to calm down, none of this matters, because your virtue is not under threat".

The Epicurean approach (and here I have to stress that I am basing this on the spirit of the philosophy as I understand, rather than any particular passage) here is to accept that we are human and prone to natural reactions; a god-like posture cannot be achieved. Instead, ataraxia is to be achieved by trying not to put yourself in situations that could cause mental pain for the sake of unnatural and unnecessary desires: e.g. politics, power, excessive wealth.

The difference is that some pain is unavoidable: an Epicurean would suffer greatly at a loss of a child or a friend and ataraxia is not a goal in this case. A stoic would have to control the suffering by reminding self that virtue is all that matters.

Post by "Don" of February 9, 2023 at 7:06 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

The difference is that some pain is unavoidable: an Epicurean would suffer greatly at a loss of a child or a friend and ataraxia is not a goal in this case. A stoic would have to control the suffering by reminding self that virtue is all that matters.

And I agree. Philodemus is very clear that people will - and should - feel the bite of grief at the loss of a loved one or feel the bite of anger when purposefully wronged by someone. We are all human with natural human reactions. But he also wrote that an Epicurean will not let those feelings overwhelm themselves. The "strength of mind" allows one to eventually put it all in context, to understand that the loved one no longer exists and does not feel pain, is not separated from them in some afterlife, and that pleasant memories of them can be recalled and enjoyed. In that case, it is not a Stoic indifference to the loved one's passing. It is a clear-eyed acceptance of reality, both the bite of grief and the eventual - maybe even a long time - acceptance of the world as it is. Same way with anger. We feel that bite if we are wronged, not a stoic indifference. But we don't fire off that email in the heat of anger. We make choices with an eventual calm mind that will lead to a pleasurable outcome.

[Quote from waterholic](#)

ataraxia is to be achieved by trying not to put yourself in situations that could cause mental pain for the sake of unnatural and unnecessary desires: e.g. politics, power, excessive wealth

Ataraxia is achieved by working through and internalizing the antidotes to fear and anxiety: [death is nothing to us](#); the gods present no reason to fear them; some things do happen by chance; we *can* make prudent decisions to lead a pleasurable life, even deciding sometimes to undergo painful experiences if they lead eventually to pleasure; we are not constrained by Fate; etc. Ataraxia is a source of pleasure within ourselves available at all times. It's true that we need to be careful about putting ourselves in situations that cause mental pain, but avoiding things does not create ataraxia. We gain ataraxia/ tranquility by applying Epicurus's antidotes - his philosophical medicine - to our fearful, anxiety-ridden minds. Epicureanism is not a philosophy of avoidance or timidity or refusal to engage with the world. It is a philosophy of personal responsibility and embracing the world as it is, not as we wish it to be or not as some kind of obstacle or show for us to demonstrate our superior virtue.

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2023 at 7:57 AM

As Don said at the start I don't think he and i are far apart at all.

We are in agreement that ataraxia / tranquility is not THE goal that supercedes all others, and that is virtually the entire thrust of my point.

What i think is perhaps worth talking about further is this point which I am not sure i have seen Don make before:

[Quote from Don](#)

but it is pleasure that is always available to us

[Quote from Don](#)

I continue to "soapbox" that my reading of katastematic pleasures, including ataraxia, are those that arise from within ourselves and that these are the only pleasures in life that we can be confident of at all times.

Frankly that is a new assertion to me and i am not sure that I am aware of textual citations to support it, nor do i think it is obvious that this is true. Are not examples such as waterholic referenced, such as grief at the death of a child, not an example of why that is not "always" available, or even appropriate?

If there is any difference between Don and I it is that as he says, I want to banish every last drop of any implication of "passivity" or "acceptance of things which could be changed" as a

connotation of "ataraxia" or "tranquility." I perceive Don to be= focusing on the "strength of mind" aspect with which I surely agree.

"Strength of mind" is certainly something I would always cultivate and hope to have, and arguably might be always available, but as to whether the word "tranquility" is a term that we should cultivate so as to have in every situation, I see that as a horse of a different stripe.

And in the end that is a large part of what we are talking about here: the best word to describe what we think Epicurus would be describing as highly valuable. "Strength of mind" - absolutely yes ----- but that is not the primary definition of tranquility as I understand the use of the word.

Strength of mind to keep one's mind focused on what needs to be done at all times - even in times of peril - is surely a top priority of Epicurus. But is "calmness" a complete synonym for that? I would not say so.

I know the Brits like to "keep calm and carry on" but that slogan has never impressed me as the best way to look at things. The "stiff upper lip" seems to go along with Stoicism to me.

Post by "Cassius" of February 9, 2023 at 8:04 AM

Aside from this cite which indicates something other than "calmness" (can you sing along a glorious triumph-song calmly?) , is there not another about the wise man WILL cry out while on the rack?

Quote

VS47. I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and I have closed off every one of your devious entrances. And we will not give ourselves up as captives, to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who cling to it maundering, we will leave from life singing aloud a glorious triumph-song on how nicely we lived.

Here it is from Diogenes Laertius:

Quote

And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy. Only the wise man will show gratitude, and will constantly speak well of his friends alike in their presence and their absence. Yet when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament.

So there is my explicit license from the texts: When I am on the rack I will not "keep calm and carry on" like nothing significant is happening! 😊

Post by “Don” of February 9, 2023 at 8:21 AM

Quote

Quote

And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy (eudaimonia) Only the wise man will show gratitude, and will constantly speak well of his friends alike in their presence and their absence. Yet when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament.

So there is my explicit license from the texts: When I am on the rack I will not "keep calm and carry on" like nothing significant is happening!

I'll see your underlined text and raise your another 😊 Heading off to work, so don't take silence for anything other than being unable to get to the forum before this evening.

We are not done, my friend 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2023 at 9:04 AM

No we are not done at all, but in the meantime Don has inspired another thread:

Thread

[Five Doses That Trump Four Every Time - The "Five-Part Cure"](#)

[Edit: Originally posted as "Six-Part" Cure, consolidated to five for reasons stated in [post 16 below.](#)]

My issues with the tetrapharmakon have been frequently stated. What would I suggest is a much better summary that is better documented in the texts? Instead of the "four-part cure" I think we can look to a much better-stated "Six-part cure" as stated by Torquatus in "On Ends" (which means it was taken from the best handbooks available in about 50 BC by Cicero, who

also had access to the...



Cassius

February 9, 2023 at 9:04 AM

Post by “Don” of February 10, 2023 at 11:02 PM

In the spirit of "not being done" and to not further hijack this thread (Sorry, @waterholic !), I have created a new thread for the discussion of whether we can be more confident in katastematic pleasure rather than kinetic pleasure...

Thread

[Confidence in Katastematic Pleasure](#)

This thread grows out of another thread, specifically [my "soapboxing" posts that were a response to @A Gardner and @Cassius where I "took a stand for ataraxia."](#)

For those who don't want too much review, my primary contentions were:

1. Epicurus advocates strengthening a quiet, calm, anxiety-free mind.
2. Equanimity/tranquility/ataraxia is available at all times, even under duress and trying circumstances.
3. IF we can cultivate ataraxia, we have a much better chance of making a good choice to remove,

...



Don

February 10, 2023 at 11:00 PM