

Perspectives On "Proving" That Pleasure is "The Good"

Post by "Todd" of December 19, 2022 at 4:34 PM

[Admin Edit: This thread was branched off after Todd's initial post in the discussion about [Emily Austin's "Living For Pleasure."](#)]

Another thing I liked, was her point about psychological hedonism. It's not that we *ought to* choose pleasure. It's that we *do* choose pleasure. We can't help it. We just tend to be bad at it, especially when we don't realize that's what we're doing, or we refuse to admit it.

The battle is half won! We don't need to *convince* people to pursue pleasure. We just need to help them realize they're already doing it, and show them how to do it better!

Full disclosure: I like that one because I tried to argue the same thing to Cassius several years ago when he was saying something pessimistic.

Post by "Cassius" of December 19, 2022 at 4:57 PM

Ha my bad memory prevents me from disagreeing with you about my saying something pessimistic!

But maybe what I said then is something I still repeat - that while this is true sometimes, it's unfortunately not always true -

[Quote from Todd](#)

The battle is half won! We don't need to convince people to pursue pleasure.

As per a post I made earlier this afternoon, I think the real heart of Epicurus is not to help everyone go along their same merry way, just better calculating the expectable results in terms of pain vs pleasure (although that is indeed a part).

Unfortunately the battle is far from won against religion and false philosophies to accept that happiness *should be* the goal of life. Far too many people want to ignore Epicurus' views on the nature of the universe and the proper approach to knowledge, and cling to their existing

religious and ethical views, and in so doing they miss the thrust and the long term benefit . They still haven't - and refuse to - admit that there is no "good" other than what derives from pleasure. (Which is the danger I think you and I are agreeing on in too easily thinking that our own personal preferences as to politics or anything else are necessarily synonymous with "the good."

And one reason for that is that inevitably in life crises will occur, and the standard calculation of maximizing pleasure over pain becomes very difficult to apply. That's in addition to the many who have already fallen into despair and find that they can't relate to a "pleasure" focus at all. If we aren't prepared on the "physics" and the "epistemology" then the emotional pain of the moment can easily cause us to fall back into despair or nihilism or both far too easily - or fail to climb out of it if we are already there.

Of course I don't think that's a "pessimistic" outlook - but I do think that were Epicurus here today he would stress those aspects of his philosophy as much or more than the psychology. In fact I think he would probably say "Look how little it has gotten you to focus on material wealth and the pleasures of the moment and how you still fail to understand your place in the universe and how to resist logical word games that have you as doubtful as ever about the ability to know anything at all."

Not disagreeing with you as much as using the opportunity to dig in as deep as possible on all the merits of Epicurus. 😊

Post by “Todd” of December 19, 2022 at 5:30 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Ha my bad memory prevents me from disagreeing with you about my saying something pessimistic!

But maybe what I said then is something I still repeat - that while this is true sometimes, it's unfortunately not always true -

I don't remember exactly what you said then either. It was probably something a lot like that.

Agreed as to all your counter-points. I didn't say it was fully won, only half. Maybe it's a big half.

Post by “Todd” of December 19, 2022 at 5:54 PM

I love her jabs at Stoicism!

Maybe she would have been better advised to avoid this from a strictly making-friends-and-selling-books perspective, but for me it's the most entertaining part of the book. The Stoic ideas sound so mystical, and utterly ridiculous when you have a witty writer who's sympathetic to Epicurus to make the comparison. (You have done a great job too, Cassius. No offense, but this here's a real, live academic philosopher!)

Too bad she didn't also take on the Platonists though. As trendy as the Stoics have been recently in popular culture, it's the Platonic ideas that are so deeply embedded in the *actual* culture that are the real problem.

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2022 at 6:11 PM

Absolutely agreed on all points in post 62. I presume you saw her article focusing on the stoic angle that is linked in the first post of this thread?

Post by “Todd” of December 19, 2022 at 6:15 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Absolutely agreed on all points in post 62. I presume you saw her article focusing on the stoic angle that is linked in the first post of this thread?

Yes, I did see that. Also a great article.

Post by “Joshua” of December 19, 2022 at 8:19 PM

What Todd says about pleasure is something I mentioned on the podcast, I think in the first episode of the Torquatus material or near it.

Since I'm certain I did a poor job of explaining it then, I'll summarize a variation of the same idea.

1. Epicurus uses the example of infants and newborn animals to demonstrate the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain descriptively.
2. He proceeds by noticing that the condition of the infant is one unburdened by culture, education, sophistication, bias, social expectation, rationalization and so on.
3. The unwritten premise: that infancy, free from all of those, and directed in its pursuits only by nature itself, is the best guide to uncovering the proper end of life.
4. The normative conclusion: that the proper end of life is the pursuit of pleasure, and the avoidance of pain.

The descriptive premise (that pleasure *is* pursued as the goal) and the normative conclusion (that pleasure *should* be pursued as the goal) are connected, and I think inextricably so.

Post by “Todd” of December 19, 2022 at 9:00 PM

Ok, I'm going to play devil's advocate a bit.

That's certainly a piece of evidence, but the fact that infants or animals do something hardly proves that rational adult humans do it. Much less that they *ought* to do it.

I think those things are both true (we do, and we should). I just don't think that particular argument is very convincing to someone who doesn't already agree with the conclusion. Some big logical holes there.

What else have you got? 😊

Edit: Sorry, [Joshua](#) , I hope that didn't seem like an assault out of nowhere! I like your connection between the descriptive and normative aspects. I was just wondering if we have any other arguments of Epicurus as to why pleasure? Seems like an important thing to establish, and this argument feels flimsy.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 19, 2022 at 10:09 PM

Infants and animals were examples used in ancient Greece to make an argument for pleasure, both "do" and "ought." Today we have neuroscientific research, such as Barrett, Lembke and others, to provide the "do." (I don't have more specifics at hand; just seeing if this will advance the discussion.) Then the task becomes getting to "ought." I've personally never found formal logic at all convincing. I tend toward more practical means, such as "if we understand that pleasure and pain are guides to our behavior, doesn't it make good sense to understand how best to work with them? Why not try it out for a while and evaluate your results?"

But I'm uncertain as to the posts between [Todd](#) and [Joshua](#) and where they're going....

Post by “Godfrey” of December 19, 2022 at 10:11 PM

Oh, I just noticed [Todd](#) 's edit; we cross posted. It makes more sense now. 👍

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2022 at 10:47 PM

Responding on the Epicurus argument, as I understand it it is simply an observation that the command to pursue pleasure and avoid pain is imprinted by Nature, and we know this because we observe through our senses that infants of all living types do it before they are corrupted by arguments in any direction otherwise. And of course in most cases (other than human) no other living being is ever corrupted away from that direction unless clearly by disease or some similar defect.

Now the question of whether we "should" follow nature as adults is something that people certainly have different opinions on, based on all sorts of logic and supernatural revelation. That's the classic argument of Cicero and others that we are not cows - we are somehow "better" than that. But I think Epicurus is saying that it is THOSE arguments which are flimsy. No constructs of the human mind carry the weight by which we should consider them valid to overturn the clear dictate of nature.

Of course people who consider logic and reason to be handed down from on high, or somehow "higher" than nature in any way, will never agree to this form of reasoning. But the observation and conclusion make perfect sense to me, and that's why Epicurus refused to accept that logical reasoning can or should be consulted in order to prove that pleasure is to be pursued and pain avoided.

That's where the dividing line is drawn. If nature provides us no direct leading as to what to avoid and what to pursue other than pleasure and pain, then no amount of argument and no type of logic can ever be accepted to contradict that leadership from nature - if we are to accept nature and not our own brainpower as the ultimate standard.

And this is why the canonic of Epicurus is so important, because it's in this field that we clearly and affirmatively take the position that abstract logical reasoning - divorced from observations based on nature - can never be allowed to trump the clear dictates of nature itself. Ignore the canonic and the physics with which it is intertwined and you'll never be able to have confidence that this is the right conclusion.

And just so I can go on record as potentially offending everyone in the conversation 😊 , that's why I have only limited interest in the modern 'research' --

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Today we have neuroscientific research, such as Barrett, Lembke and others, to provide the "do." (I don't have more specifics at hand; just seeing if this will advance the discussion.)

No amount of "research" is going to convince me more firmly of the truth of Epicurus' conclusion beyond my own observations of the young of all animals - exactly as Epicurus specified. This research and these arguments are interesting and perhaps helpful to some. But I would say that the dictate of nature to pursue pleasure and avoid pain is not something that needs to be proven, or really can be "proven," beyond the clear evidence that has been available to everyone to see for 3000 years (and really much longer than that).

This is why discussing these things is so helpful. It's on *this* issue where Epicurus stands or falls as a philosopher, and where he breaks the chains of both supernatural religion and false philosophy. The hedonic calculus and other practical observations on how to view and pursue pleasure are just icing on the cake. *This* - a confident basis for taking the position that we know pleasure to be "the good" - is the issue on which everything stands or falls.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 19, 2022 at 11:54 PM

I do think that modern research has largely been a confirmation of Epicurus' position, which I find informative. There's no reason to take what he said "on faith" when it makes intuitive sense and has empirical confirmation. His original reasoning has been confirmed, to the point where many of his detractors words throughout the centuries look pretty ridiculous now.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 10:10 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This is why discussing these things is so helpful. It's on *this* issue where Epicurus stands or falls as a philosopher, and where he breaks the chains of both supernatural religion and false philosophy.

Hmm...yes, it's been a while since I've thought much about the core arguments. I'm still convinced that Epicurus was right, but the arguments that persuaded me before, don't seem as persuasive now.

I feel like I want a theory. A theory grounded in reality, of course, but still a theory. This is might be a corrosive desire.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 10:19 AM

Todd I think the direction you are talking about would make for a really important discussion but we probably ought to branch it off from this thread on the Austin book. If you get time could you tee up that question under a new title, because I think it would help a lot if we had a thread on it - especially since you've had time to think about the issues for several years now, - would make for a good discussion that should be findable in the future.

[Quote from Todd](#)

A theory grounded in reality, of course, but still a theory. This is might be a corrosive desire.

I don't think that's a corrosive desire at all -- at least it's not corrosive to consider the question and try to come to a resting place on what is possible and what is not.

This from Pythocles seems applicable:

Quote from Letter to Pythocles

[86] We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.

[87] For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.

Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them. But when one accepts one theory and rejects another, which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry and has recourse to myth.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 10:25 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

I feel like I want a theory. A theory grounded in reality, of course, but still a theory. This is might be a corrosive desire.

This is an interesting way to phrase that (and I'm meaning that as a positive thing not a criticism).

Could you share what you think of when you say "theory"? Would you have an example from another philosophy or religion (not that you necessarily agree with; just an example)? Or what you'd want the theory to be in Epicurean philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 10:29 AM

I think I will go ahead and break this into a new thread....

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 11:01 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't think that's a corrosive desire at all -- at least it's not corrosive to consider the question and try to come to a resting place on what is possible and what is not.

That remark was an attempt at humor, mostly. Not entirely. 😊

I didn't really expect this to lead to a major discussion. Not that I mind, but I'll need to try to collect my thoughts a bit more to keep this from becoming a rambling stream-of-consciousness on my end.

[Quote from Don](#)

This is an interesting way to phrase that (and I'm meaning that as a positive thing not a criticism).

Could you share what you think of when you say "theory"? Would you have an example from another philosophy or religion (not that you necessarily agree with; just an example)? Or what you'd want the theory to be in Epicurean philosophy.

Thanks for the kind reply, [Don](#). To answer briefly, I've believe a theory is required to make sense of facts. Facts don't interpret themselves. A theory needs to come first, in some sense. This is not Epicurean exactly, but it seems logically sound.

In the empirical sciences, for example, you don't just start collecting facts and see what you come up with. (Well, some might, but I would say that is not good science.) You start with an idea, and then go looking for facts that would contradict it.

So when Epicureans say to look at nature to see that pleasure is the aim. I wonder if there are useful things we could say prior to looking at nature. So when we do turn our attention to nature, we have a more solid case, than something like, "if you don't see it, I can't explain it to you". Not that we would say it like that, but that's the kind of unsatisfying feeling I get with the "babies" argument.

Post by “Charles” of December 20, 2022 at 11:06 AM

I've been searching for ways to strengthen the infant argument for some time now. I think you're correct in casting scrutiny upon its value in instructing others. One of the largest hurdles of speaking to others about the philosophy is trying to get someone to recognize the value of pleasure and why it shouldn't be shunned.

We may very well take to pointing to nature as "proof" but to someone unconvinced or highly skeptical, we're pointing to infantile bodily reactions and processes, something not wholly convincing in itself.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 11:07 AM

Yes, precisely [Charles](#)

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 11:08 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

but I'll need to try to collect my thoughts a bit more to keep this from becoming a rambling stream-of-consciousness on my end.

Don't let that worry you too much!

Also:

To me what you are bringing up reminds me of this which [Frances Wright addresses in her Chapter 15](#). I am not at all sure that what she is writing is what Epicurus would say, and in fact I think she goes significantly further and off in a different direction than Epicurus did. But the description of the topic I think is very much on point, and deciding whether what she says is right or consistent with Epicurus might help people think about what is really involved in the question of "theory" in the first place. Is this correct? - *"In philosophy — that is, in knowledge — inquiry is everything; theory and hypothesis are worse than nothing."*

Quote from Frances Wright A Few Days In Athens Chapter 15

“I admit the truth of the metaphor,” said Theon. “But may we not simplify too much as well as too little? May we not push investigation beyond the limits assigned to human reason, and, with a boldness approaching to profanity, tear, without removing, the veil which enwraps the mysteries of creation from our scrutiny?”

“Without challenging the meaning of the terms you have employed,” said Metrodorus, “I would observe, that there is little danger of our pushing investigation too far. Unhappily the limits prescribed to us by our few and imperfect senses must ever cramp the sphere of our observation, as compared to the boundless range of things; and that even when we shall have strained and improved our senses to the uttermost. We trace an effect to a cause, and that cause to another cause, and so on, till we hold some few links of a chain, whose extent like the charmed circle, is without beginning as without end.”

“I apprehend the difficulties,” observed Leontium, “which embarrass the mind of our young friend. Like most aspirants after knowledge, he has a vague and incorrect idea of what he is pursuing, and still more, of what may be attained. In the schools you have hitherto frequented,” she continued, addressing the youth, “certain images of virtue, vice, truth, knowledge, are presented to the imagination, and these abstract qualities, or we may call them, figurative beings, are made at once the objects of speculation and adoration. A law is laid down, and the feelings and opinions of men are predicated upon it; a theory is built, and all animate and inanimate nature is made to speak in its support; an hypothesis is advanced, and all the mysteries of nature are treated as explained. You have heard of, and studied various systems of philosophy; but real philosophy is opposed to all systems. Her whole business is observation; and the results of that observation constitute all her knowledge. She receives no truths, until she has tested them by experience; she advances no opinions, unsupported by the testimony of facts; she acknowledges no virtue, but that involved in beneficial actions; no vice, but that involved in actions hurtful to ourselves or to others. Above all, she advances no dogmas, — is slow to assert what is, — and calls nothing impossible.

The science of philosophy is simply a science of observation, both as regards the world without us, and the world within; and, to advance in it, are requisite only sound senses, well developed and exercised faculties, and a mind free of prejudice. The objects she has in view, as regards the external world, are, first, to see things as they are, and secondly, to examine their structure, to ascertain their properties, and to observe their relations one to the other. — As respects the world within, or the philosophy of mind, she has in view, first, to examine our sensations, or the impressions of external things on our senses; which operation involves, and is involved in, the examination of those external things themselves: secondly, to trace back to our sensations, the first development of all our faculties; and again, from these sensations, and the exercise of

our different faculties as developed by them, to trace the gradual formation of our moral feelings, and of all our other emotions: thirdly, to analyze all these our sensations, thoughts, and emotions, — that is, to examine the qualities of our own internal, sentient matter, with the same, and yet more, closeness of scrutiny, than we have applied to the examination of the matter that is without us: finally, to investigate the justness of our moral feelings, and to weigh the merit and demerit of human actions; which is, in other words, to judge of their tendency to produce good or evil, — to excite pleasurable or painful feelings in ourselves or others. You will observe, therefore, that, both as regards the philosophy of physics, and the philosophy of mind, all is simply a process of investigation. It is a journey of discovery, in which, in the one case, we commission our senses to examine the qualities of that matter, which is around us, and, in the other, endeavor, by attention to the varieties of our consciousness, to gain a knowledge of those qualities of matter which constitute our susceptibilities of thought and feeling.”

“This explanation is new to me,” observed Theon, “and I will confess, startling to my imagination. It is pure materialism!”

“You may so call it,” rejoined Leontium, “But when you have so called it — what then? The question remains: is it true? or is it false?”

“I should be disposed to say — false, since it confounds all my preconceived notions of truth and error, of right and wrong.”

“Of truth and error, of right and wrong, in the sense of *correct* or *incorrect* is, I presume, your meaning,” said Leontium. “You do not involve moral rectitude or the contrary in a matter of opinion?”

“If the opinion have a moral or immoral tendency I do,” said the youth.

“A simple matter of fact can have no such tendency or ought not, if we are rational creatures.”

“And would not, if we were always reasoning beings,” said Metrodorus; “but as the ignorance and superstition which surround our infancy and youth, favor the development of the imagination at the expense of the judgment, we are ever employed in the coining of chimeras, rather than in the discovery of truths; and if ever the poor judgment make an effort to dispel these fancies of the brain, she is repulsed, like a sacrilegious intruder into religious mysteries.”

“Until our opinions are made to rest on facts,” said Leontium, “the error of our young friend — the most dangerous of all errors, being one of principle and involving many — must ever pervade the world. And it was because I suspected this leading

misconception of the very nature — of the very end and aim of the science he is pursuing, that I attempted an explanation of what should be sought, and of what can alone be attained. In philosophy — that is, in knowledge — inquiry is everything; theory and hypothesis are worse than nothing. Truth is but approved facts. Truth, then, is one with the knowledge of these facts. To shrink from inquiry, is to shrink from knowledge. And to prejudge an opinion as true or false, because it interferes with some preconceived abstraction we call vice or virtue, is as if we were to draw the picture of a man we had never seen, and then, upon seeing him, were to dispute his being the man in question, because unlike our picture.”

“But if this opinion interfered with another, of whose truth we imagined ourselves certain.”

“Then clearly, in one or the other, we are mistaken; and the only way to settle the difficulty is to examine and compare the evidences of both.”

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The discussion goes on further from there but that part is probably the heart of the question. What is the proper attitude toward "theory"?

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 11:39 AM

I admit that I like the "babies and animal" argument as well as "it's as obvious as snow is cold, fire is hot."

However, I always come back to why anyone does anything. For Stoics, being virtuous - or being perceived as acting for virtue - provides them with a sense of satisfaction. To me, satisfaction = pleasure. For Christians, believing in an afterlife appears to bring them joy. Joy = pleasure. For Buddhists, ridding oneself of desires brings contentment. Contentment = pleasure. And so on down the line. To me, there's no escaping it.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 11:54 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

However, I always come back to why anyone does anything

Yes, this is closely related to what I was thinking. It might be the first step.

The problem I foresee is that pleasure becomes almost a formal term. Pleasure could be defined as what anyone chooses. I think that approach is important in some contexts (it's the starting point of causal-realist economics). But Epicurean ethics needs pleasure to do more work than that, so to speak, if it's to provide any sort of guidance.

Post by “Charles” of December 20, 2022 at 12:00 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

Pleasure could be defined as what anyone chooses.

The same could be said about desire. I find it to be extremely reductive and almost gimmicky to reduce a lot of other ways of life and decisions on the grounds of "Oh you were still pursuing pleasure or acting on your desires; you just didn't know it." Because if that were truly the case, then the affected person would simply keep to their ways and would stay unswayed.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 12:03 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

Pleasure could be defined as what anyone chooses.

What anyone chooses that does not cause mental or physical pain (in the widest sense)?

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 12:09 PM

[Quote from Charles](#)

I find it to be extremely reductive and almost gimmicky to reduce a lot of other ways of life and decisions on the grounds of "Oh you were still pursuing pleasure

Ah! But not all pleasure should be chosen. Do those pleasures I have listed lead to a life of secure pleasure or can they lead to anxiety about the future or how one is perceived by others?

Post by "Don" of December 20, 2022 at 12:22 PM

[Quote from Charles](#)

Oh you were still pursuing pleasure or acting on your desires; you just didn't know it."

I would also say that they *know* it, they just can't admit it to themselves because "pleasure" is seen as a "four letter word."

Post by "Charles" of December 20, 2022 at 12:26 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Do those pleasures I have listed lead to a life of secure pleasure [...]

They would certainly believe so. Though in some respects, maybe they have a point, not in their rhetoric attached to such lifestyles, but acting in according to their desires in their own non-Epicurean way.

I don't believe pleasure can be isolated as a sole concept in the philosophy without an extremely vague definition attached to it, let alone through comparison. Instead, it should be tied to ethics and the concepts in the PD's and such. Perhaps it's less "happiness and contentment through my free will and contemplation" and more "pleasure is the active and passive sensation I experience from my study of nature and rejection of the supernatural on top of making choices and avoidances according to my desires."

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 20, 2022 at 12:27 PM

[Todd](#), I am sensing perhaps a bit of resistance toward pleasure? And maybe there could be something deeper going on in your resistance? Possibly you may be uncertain if you can trust your inner sense of pleasure?

We subjectively know what pleasure is, just as honey is sweet. And as Epicureans, we remember that we don't always choose for immediate pleasure, but we sometimes make choices that will lead to greater pleasure in the future. This means that we at times will be using trial and error and will observe the results from our choices -- and evaluate which choices were best -- and then we learn. For example: I used to drink more beer and wine, but then as I applied "choices and avoidances" then I could see that I actually had more pleasure by abstaining or only drinking small quantities. And also this points to both pleasure and pain are considered in choices and avoidances. What we have left of Epicurus' teachings is sometimes not as clear about all of this, but over time I believe we can develop the philosophy so that it is much easier to explain and discuss.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 12:28 PM

Plus from my perspective, Epicurus's philosophy is based on making skillful choices as to what to act upon and what to reject as to live a pleasurable life.

Post by “Charles” of December 20, 2022 at 12:32 PM

[Quote from Charles](#)

Perhaps it's less "happiness and contentment through my free will and contemplation" and more "pleasure is the active and passive sensation I experience from my study of nature and rejection of the supernatural on top of making choices and avoidances according to my desires."

I'm reminded of a weekly zoom call we had where [Mathitis Kipouros](#) spoke about a peer of his where his [camotero's] attempt to teach him about the limits and variety of pleasures was met with utter confusion. His peer inadvertently spoke like an Epicurean and presumably needed

Epicurean advice but the gap could not be bridged because of their different understanding of pleasure.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 12:32 PM

[Quote from Charles](#)

Though in some respects, maybe they have a point, not in their rhetoric attached to such lifestyles, but acting in according to their desires in their own non-Epicurean way.

Well, Epicurus said it's better to follow the religious beliefs of the hoi polloi than be subject to determinism.

[Quote from Charles](#)

Perhaps it's less "happiness and contentment through my free will and contemplation" and more "pleasure is the active and passive sensation I experience from my study of nature and rejection of the supernatural on top of making choices and avoidances according to my desires."

Ok, I think I can see where you're going.

I'd add that Epicurus only allowed for two primary categories of feelings: pleasure and pain. All our sensations are supposed to fall into one of those (with obvious gradations and variations).

Post by “Charles” of December 20, 2022 at 12:42 PM

I'm approaching all of this from the perspective of proselytization. The issue is with the definition of pleasure itself, so, as to avoid a word-game, it makes more sense to ground it into something purely Epicurean to avoid a lot of the "baggage" the word will inevitably face. A similar example would be the word "indifference" in the context of Stoicism. It takes on its own meaning with its own contextual points and definitions tied to source material.

I realize this may be going a bit off topic and is simultaneously opening a large can of worms, but it might be better to recuperate the idea of pleasure rather than building a theory of pleasure. By this, when we say "pleasure" we refer to choices and avoidances, prudence, the

categorization of desires, the rose problem, etc. In doing so, our usage and treatment in such a different context might encourage others to reconsider their understanding of pleasure, leading to an easier comprehension. Consider it the wrymwood before the honey, in this case, if you will.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 12:49 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Ah! But not all pleasure should be chosen. Do those pleasures I have listed lead to a life of secure pleasure or can they lead to anxiety about the future or how one is perceived by others?

This is a good point. Maybe that's what I was missing.

So everyone is always choosing pleasure, in the broad sense that we always choose the alternative we imagine will be most satisfactory. That much is just logic and introspection, and I think it is undeniably true if you're honest about it.

Then turning to ethics we can talk about whether those choices actually do result in pleasure, in the concrete sense of a good feeling.

That sounds right to me.

In the meantime, I was thinking about the "babies" argument, and I have some serious concerns there, if anyone wants to get into that.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 20, 2022 at 1:16 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

So everyone is always choosing pleasure, in the broad sense that we always choose the alternative we imagine will be most satisfactory.

I can't completely agree with this, since you used the word "everyone". Some people do make choices out of how they want to appear to others, so as to gain respect. And then if that is to

impress those who chose according to "God's will" , then this is based on idealistic virtue not on pleasurable outcomes.

Edit note: I should have said: so as to try to gain respect or in an attempt to gain respect

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 1:21 PM

[Quote from Charles](#)

ground it into something purely Epicurean

Hmmm... So that's the issue then. To be "purely Epicurean" hints at there being some "essence" of Epicurus's philosophy whereas Epicurus tried to use nature (and human nature) as it is found to serve as the foundation. There are definitely technical, specific terms used in Epicureanism like prolepsis, but "pleasure" is meant to cast a wide net and to be grounded in the natural feeling of pleasure vs pain. Epicurus's whole thing was to expand the definition in contrast to the Cyrenaics and Platonists.

To narrowly define pleasure or to constrain it would be a step in the wrong direction I believe.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 20, 2022 at 1:21 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

choose the alternative we imagine will be most satisfactory

Also, the word "satisfactory" doesn't fully encompass pleasure, happiness, sweetness in life. I have to contemplate and consider that these are my goals, otherwise the value system of "appearances" (status, wealth, high fashion, etc) can distract me from living the best life given my means.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 1:21 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Some people do make choices out of how they want to appear to others, so as to gain respect

And why do they want to do that? What is their motivation?

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 20, 2022 at 1:24 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

And why do they want to do that? What is their motivation?

Fear and lack of true friendship.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 1:35 PM

I sure am glad we split this off into a new thread!

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 1:36 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Todd](#)

choose the alternative we imagine will be most satisfactory

Also, the word "satisfactory" doesn't fully encompass pleasure, happiness, sweetness in life. I have to contemplate and consider that these are my goals, otherwise the value system of "appearances" (status, wealth, high fashion, etc) can distract me from living

the best life given my means.

Just to clarify, I didn't attach any special meaning to "satisfactory" there. I'd be perfectly happy to substitute "pleasant" there if we want to stick to Epicurean terms.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 2:22 PM

Here's some controversy for your afternoon! Enjoy! 😊

So, that "babies" argument...

At first I thought it was merely unconvincing, but I'm starting to think it is actually an argument that is better avoided.

First, does anyone know if we have Epicurus on record using it? I know Cicero puts it in the mouth of Torquatus. I'd guess Lucretius probably used it...you can find anything in that poem! I'm curious to see what the real pedigree of the argument is.

I said earlier, a theory is required before you can interpret facts. I meant "required" literally. It's not just a nice-to-have. You must have one, and if you think you don't have one, you're deceiving yourself - you just haven't made your theory explicit. If "theory" sounds too Platonic, substitute "assumptions".

To give a (hopefully) non-controversial example, one of the assumptions in any kind of "look to nature" argument is that nature is the right place to look. I don't think I've ever heard anyone explain why nature is the right place to look. It's taken for granted. I'm fine with that, because nature IS usually a good place to look, and there aren't too many alternatives.

The argument that we should look to babies reasons (!) that they are in a kind of pure, or uncorrupted state of nature, so should serve as an ethical norm. An obvious corollary is that we shouldn't look to the behavior of more mature humans because they have been corrupted. It's not always clear what the corrupting influence is - I could turn that into another rant.

My problem is with the implicit assumption that any deviation from the original state of nature is necessarily for the worse.

That is a profoundly destructive belief. I feel comfortable calling that idea evil - if not in an absolute sense, certainly in the sense of being anti-human. And not only anti-human, but anti-life of any sort. Life is growth, which is change. The absence of change is death.

Now, I'm not saying the "babies" argument itself is evil...it's a reasonable thing to point to as a piece of evidence. But it has in it a seed of an idea that could be taken in some really bad directions.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 2:57 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

And why do they want to do that? What is their motivation?

Fear and lack of true friendship.

Exactly! They are in pain. How do humans relieve pain? By moving toward what gives them pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 3:11 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

My problem is with the implicit assumption that any deviation from the original state of nature is necessarily for the worse.

I would say that is not implicit Epicurus' position at all. He was certainly in favor of living in civilization and seems to have enjoyed a good life under the Athenian system, which is not at all a state of nature.

If the point is that pleasure and pain are the only faculties that Nature has given for ultimate determination of what to choose and what to avoid, what other or higher faculty would you suggest? Certainly not "reason" because why would anyone choose reason if it did not bring pleasure?

If you want an "anti-life" or "anti-nature" argument it seems to me that there is nothing more pure than that men can invent for themselves a faculty of choice better than what nature has provided.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 3:19 PM

[Cassius](#) brings up good points in #43.

It also is important to remember that Epicurus's problem was with indoctrination within the Platonic educational system: *paideia παιδεία* is the word he consistently uses.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 3:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say that is not implicit Epicurus' position at all. He was certainly in favor of living in civilization and seems to have enjoyed a good life under the Athenian system, which is not at all a state of nature.

I'm not saying it is implicit in Epicurus' position, but if he used that kind of argument (still unclear to me that he did, but seems at least plausible), it is implicit in the argument. My understanding is that class of argument pre-dated Epicurus. Wouldn't surprise me if it came from Plato, but maybe it was around before him too. I'm pretty sure Plato used an argument about inborn knowledge that we lose touch with as we are corrupted by the physical world. Sounds similar

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 3:24 PM

I would say that the 'nature as the norm' position is foundational to Epicurus position, so I agree with your comment here that we have to look to the question of whether we should look to Nature or not.

[Quote from Todd](#)

To give a (hopefully) non-controversial example, one of the assumptions in any kind of "look to nature" argument is that nature is the right place to look. I don't think I've ever

heard anyone explain why nature is the right place to look. It's taken for granted. I'm fine with that, because nature IS usually a good place to look, and there aren't too many alternatives.

If we conclude through our observations and Epicurean reasoning that there is no world of forms or essences or "true world" beyond this one, and that all knowledge is based on the evidence of the senses, then what other foundation would support a conclusion of looking anywhere else for the norm? Because we have the capacity to revolt against nature, does that mean that we should? It's certainly possible to argue that we should, but on what foundation? Not on a foundation of gods or abstract logic, surely?

Post by "Todd" of December 20, 2022 at 3:24 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It also is important to remember that Epicurus's problem was with indoctrination within the Platonic educational system: *paideia παιδεία* is the word he consistently uses.

Right, but if that it is the only issue, then you could look to the "uneducated" for ethical guidance.

Post by "Cassius" of December 20, 2022 at 3:27 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

Right, but if that it is the only issue, then you could look to the "uneducated" for ethical guidance.

Indeed so, as Thomas Jefferson said to Peter Carr in 1787, and as I read it Epicurus would agree with this:

Moral Philosophy. I think it lost time to attend lectures on this branch. He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler, if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them? Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was

endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his Nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree. It may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body. This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason; but it is a small stock which is required for this: even a less one than what we call common sense. State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 3:27 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say that the 'nature as the norm' position is foundational to Epicurus position, so I agree with your comment here that we have to look to the question of whether we should look to Nature or not.

Agreed, but "nature" here really means "the universe". (Right?) Or I think a more useful interpretation in this context would be "reality". I don't see any disagreement on this point.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 3:30 PM

But the cradle argument takes a particular part of nature, and elevates it above the rest. That procedure needs to be justified, because it is making a value judgment.

Edit to finish this thought:

And if an attempt is made to justify that procedure, I think it becomes apparent that there is some faulty reasoning involved. Or at least reasoning with some implications that Epicurus would strongly reject.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 3:32 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

the cradle argument takes a particular part of nature, and elevates it above the rest.

Yes, the part of nature before human reasoning, with its potential for error, has weighed in with its first opinion - that its own opinion itself can supply a guide to life superior to the feelings of pleasure and pain.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 3:36 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Todd](#)

the cradle argument takes a particular part of nature, and elevates it above the rest.

Yes, the part of nature before human reasoning, with its potential for error, has weighed in with its first opinion - that its own opinion itself can supply a guide to life superior to the feelings of pleasure and pain.

Hmm...disagree, but not sure how to proceed beyond this point.

Is reason fallible, of course. But it's our only tool for judging, and that's what is being done here.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 3:38 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

It also is important to remember that Epicurus's problem was with indoctrination within the Platonic educational system: paideia παιδεία is the

word he consistently uses.

Right, but if that it is the only issue, then you could look to the "uneducated" for ethical guidance.

Well... Sometimes that might not be such a bad idea.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 3:39 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

Hmm...disagree, but not sure how to proceed beyond this point.

Is reason fallible, of course. But it's our only tool for judging, and that's what is being done here.

Yep it is difficult or impossible to bridge that divide, and it seems to me that the issue of the proper place of "reason" led to much of the revolt of Epicurus against the positions of Plato and Aristotle.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 3:39 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Todd](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

It also is important to remember that Epicurus's problem was with indoctrination within the Platonic educational system: *paideia παιδεία* is the word he consistently uses.

Right, but if that it is the only issue, then you could look to the "uneducated" for ethical guidance.

Well... Sometimes that might not be such a bad idea.

Right. I'm not bashing the uneducated (in the school-learning sense). But now you guys are changing the terms of the debate.

Post by "Todd" of December 20, 2022 at 3:42 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

it seems to me that the issue of the proper place of "reason" led to much of the revolt of Epicurus against the positions of Plato and Aristotle.

Well, this is kind of what *I'm* saying! The cradle argument IS reasoning.

So how would you describe the proper place of reason?

Post by "Cassius" of December 20, 2022 at 3:44 PM

I think the best presentation of this issues is going to be in the section of DeWitt's book starting here, although it is covered in a lot of other places in the book too. I am not citing this to say "you should believe it because Dewitt said it" but as a starting point for anyone lurking who might want to follow the argument.

THE CANON, REASON AND NATURE

worth while to observe by what procedure this exclusion may be justified and what the consequences will be for the concept of reason itself. The position of Epicurus becomes seemingly paradoxical because there is no instrumentality by which reason can be dethroned except reason itself. Consideration of this paradox may be postponed until it has been shown how the Platonic concept of reason may be rendered absurd. The conclusions will be absolutely logical if the premises are accepted.

As will be set forth in the chapter on Physics, Epicurus adopted and declared Twelve Elementary Principles, one of which reads: "The universe consists of atoms and void." This is a positive statement. If the implied negative be made explicit, it is this, that there is nothing incorporeal except void. This is destructive of certain teachings of Plato. According to him the sensations inform us only of the things that are transient, that have a beginning and an end. The realities are the eternal forms or ideas, which are not joined up with matter and so are incorporeal. Moreover, according to the same teachings the ideas are apprehensible only by pure reason, which, being, like the ideas, discrete from matter, is itself incorporeal and divine. Logically, therefore, if there is nothing incorporeal except void, the eternal ideas and the divine incorporeal reason are alike absurdities.

By this same principle it should be noted that the incorporeal soul is also eliminated. Thus, the soul, being corporeal and incapable of pre-existence or survival, is reduced to a parity with the body. This means farewell to all the disabilities imposed upon it through imprisonment in the body and to all mystical ideas associated with successive incarnations. Corporeal reason alone is left, that is, human intelligence.

There is another of the Twelve Principles that has a specific bearing upon the Platonic concept of reason: "The atoms are always in motion." If we seek the implied negative of this positive statement — and Epicurus reasons after this fashion — it will be this, that nothing else in the universe is in motion, because the void is incapable of motion and outside of atoms and void there is nothing. It will follow also that no other cause of motion exists. It will be nonsensical, therefore, to think of divine reason as the cause of motion.

Post by "Todd" of December 20, 2022 at 3:56 PM

I feel like this is going in circles.

My reading of DeWitt is that reason is actually very important to Epicurus, it just can't be allowed to run rampant over the data of reality the way Plato used it. (Hope that's a decent summary.)

But that's what I'm trying to say! Reason is essential. It's not "bad". It's unavoidable. It just has to be used appropriately. And the cradle argument is an example of reasoning that is NOT being used carefully.

You sort of said above that reason is a corrupter of children. And now you are quoting DeWitt back at me. This is getting confusing.

LOL - Tranquility Now! Tranquility Now!

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 4:07 PM

Maybe this will be clarifying: In your opinion, is the cradle argument an example of "reasoning"?

If yes, then I would expect an Epicurean to be suspicious, and proceed with caution. We can't be slaves to authority, even if the authority is Epicurus. (Edit: that sounds like something Epicurus might have actually said.)

If no, then what do you call it? I think further discussion is not likely to be fruitful in this case.

Post by “Joshua” of December 20, 2022 at 4:14 PM

Lucretius versus the Lake Poets

by Robert Frost

‘Nature I loved; and next to Nature, Art.’

Dean, adult education may seem silly.

What of it, though? I got some willy-nilly

The other evening at your college deanery.
And grateful for it (let's not be facetious!)
For I thought Epicurus and Lucretius
By Nature meant the Whole Goddam Machinery.
But you say that in college nomenclature
The only meaning possible for Nature
In Landor's quatrain would be Pretty Scenery.
Which makes opposing it to Art absurd
I grant you—if you're sure about the word.
God bless the Dean and make his deanship plenary.

^Regarding the meaning of nature, as discussed above

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 4:39 PM

just so we have the text in front of us:

[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 better 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

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 4:43 PM

So as to the question of whether the cradle argument is reasoning, we have the cradle argument being a form of "direction of attention" rather than "proof and formal argument."

".. 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?"

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 4:49 PM

So how would you restate your concern Todd, that looking to examples of people who have not had the time or exposure to ground their actions on "abstract reasoning" is a poor idea for getting at examples of the calling of Nature?

Why is that a poor way of looking at the question? Because they are not "educated" in some goal other than the one they were born with?

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 5:07 PM

Hmm...well, I see that Epicurus is solidly in favor of the cradle non-argument.

And since he refuses to even allow it to be an argument, I guess I can only say I disagree.

I guess I could even go further and say that since it isn't an "argument", and no reasoning was used to arrive at it, then it can't possibly have any other implications. That addresses my original concern with the cradle argument. It's not an argument. Solved.

Seems like it would make it difficult to engage with others though. Not sure? Want to discuss? Nah. Come back when you agree.

And I'm not even saying I disagree with the conclusion. I just think there is a better way of getting to it. Or should be - not to say I have one ready to go.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So how would you restate your concern Todd, that looking to examples of people who have not had the time or exposure to ground their actions on "abstract reasoning" is a poor idea for getting at examples of the calling of Nature?

Why is that a poor way of looking at the question? Because they are not "educated" in some goal other than the one they were born with?

I would state my concern more or less the way I did above. Looking to a supposedly uncorrupted state of nature is problematic.

If you want to be more specific about what is corrupted and why, as you seem to be with the idea of "uneducated", I would be on board with that, although I personally don't think the solution is in that direction, because the reasoning is going to be even more involved. That is a very different thing than just pointing at babies though.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 5:21 PM

It's been an interesting thread and whether it is over or just starting, it is an important question. I take it your ultimate question is probably "Why" should we look to nature at all, regardless of whether we look at children or any other phase of life?

Why does "is" give rise to "ought"? And you definitely have another step in that process in getting from is to ought.

Of the alternatives in Torquatus it seems to me that "anticipations" makes some sense to look to as a foundation of pleasure, but why does pleasure exist at all for us to follow?

I think we're on very important territory here and the resolution comes very close to (paraphrasing Nietzsche) whether we choose to say "yes" to nature or "no". Nature allows us to do either and it is ultimately up to us to decide and pay the price / reap the consequences for our decisions.

Regardless of what we as individuals decide, Epicurus seems clearly to have chosen to say "yes" to a view of nature based on sensation/ feeling, rather than abstract logic, as the standard of a proper human life.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 5:27 PM

At least several days (or maybe a week or so) I changed the banner headline for page one to a fragment that seems to me directly applicable as another illustration of Epicurus' approach to base identification of "the good" on feeling rather than abstract analysis:

“That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about, prating meaninglessly about the good.” [Epicurus, as cited in Usener Fragment U423](#)

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 5:29 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I take it your ultimate question is probably "Why" should we look to nature at all

No! Emphatically no! I'm all in favor of nature (i.e., the universe, reality). I just think the particular way nature is used in the cradle argument was sort of inherited from other philosophers and not closely examined. I think it deserves some close examination at the very least.

I guess the fundamental problem I have is the idea that living things start good, and then get worse.

Actually, a lot of the time they start good, and get better. Not always. But sometimes. I would even venture to say most of the time.

I hate the idea that such a wonderfully positive philosophy has to be founded on that rotten, pessimistic core assumption.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 5:33 PM

Why do you see looking to the newborn as rotten and pessimistic?

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 5:34 PM

It's looking to the newborn as the pinnacle of humanity, and everything else is corrupt.

It reeks of Plato to me

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 5:34 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

Maybe this will be clarifying: In your opinion, is the cradle argument an example of "reasoning"?

I would call it observation, seeing things the way they are.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 5:40 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

I guess the fundamental problem I have is the idea that living things start good, and then get worse.

Oh, I don't necessarily think good/bad is the way to go. We as humans are observed (especially as children) to instinctively gravitate towards what gives us pleasure (in the widest sense) and to recoil from that which gives us pain. It's not good or bad. That's just what happens. As adults, we should learn - per Epicurus - how to do that skillfully to provide ourselves with a maximally pleasurable life. Some adults find other motivations and stop listening to their pain/pleasure guide.

Post by "Todd" of December 20, 2022 at 5:46 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Todd](#)

I guess the fundamental problem I have is the idea that living things start good, and then get worse.

Oh, I don't necessarily think good/bad is the way to go. We as humans are observed (especially as children) to instinctively gravitate towards what gives us pleasure (in the widest sense) and to recoil from that which gives us pain. It's not good or bad. That's just what happens. As adults, we should learn - per Epicurus - how to do that skillfully to provide ourselves with a maximally pleasurable life. Some adults find other motivations and stop listening to their pain/pleasure guide.

Yes. I agree with this, and that's what I think makes the cradle argument unnecessary. We all do it, not just infants. I'm perfectly fine with saying, "See, it's easy to see how infants seek pleasure and avoid pain. They have simple goals." You could then say, "Older people are more complicated. They seek pleasure in more advanced ways, and they often appear to seek pain in the short-term. But they hope that will bring them even greater pleasure later."

I think that is a great formulation. It avoids the "infants are just better" problems.

Post by "Todd" of December 20, 2022 at 6:21 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Todd](#)

Maybe this will be clarifying: In your opinion, is the cradle argument an example of "reasoning"?

I would call it observation, seeing things the way they are.

Sorry to bring this up [Don](#), after you just handed me a solution.

I can't accept the idea that anyone is capable of observing data and understanding it directly. You need a theory to make sense of the data, which requires reasoning. And if you don't think you do, then you *really* do.

Aside from the risks of having a theory and not knowing it, there's also the practical problem that "just observing" doesn't provide any way to discuss, disagree, or improve. You need something to talk about. Unless you disagree on the bare facts of what you actually experienced, the thing you talk about is a theory.

It's maybe beside the point now, but I have a hard time letting this kind of thing slide without remark.

Post by "Don" of December 20, 2022 at 6:41 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

"Older people are more complicated. They seek pleasure in more advanced ways, and they often appear to seek pain in the short-term. But they hope that will bring them even greater pleasure later."

I think that is a great formulation. It avoids the "infants are just better" problems.

I could see that formulation, but I'd push back on "infants are better."

They're not better. They're a data point. Animals are another data point. These demonstrate through observation that this is a natural inclination to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Adults not seeking pleasure but are another data point demonstrating what happens when we don't skillfully seem pleasure.

Pain and pleasure don't tell us what to act upon but themselves. They are a guide. We use our reasoning ability to weigh outcomes and seek that which will lead to a maximally pleasurable life.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 6:47 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I could see that formulation, but I'd push back on "infants are better."

They're not better. They're a data point. Animals are another data point. These demonstrate through observation that this is a natural inclination to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Adults not seeking pleasure but are another data point demonstrating what happens when we don't skillfully seem pleasure.

Pain and pleasure don't tell us what to act upon but themselves. They are a guide. We use our reasoning ability to weigh outcomes and seek that which will lead to a maximally pleasurable life.

I'm not saying infants are better, but that seems to be exactly what the cradle argument is saying. It holds up infants (and animals) as an ideal.

If it only said, "infants are simple, and therefore easy to understand," I would be all for it.

But it doesn't say that. And I suspect the reason it doesn't is because that form of argument came from somewhere else (definitely true), and it was adopted a bit uncritically (my own, slightly heretical idea).

I agree that they are all data points.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 7:05 PM

Hey, this may seem like a big oversight, but I just realized those quotes above were from Cicero. I had assumed they were from Epicurus.

So maybe I've conceded too much.

I don't see any references to babies or animals in either the PD or the Letter to Menoecus. Of course that doesn't prove Epicurus didn't use the cradle argument. But the case remains open!

Doesn't change anything in my positions, but it sure was disappointing to read a full-throated endorsement of the cradle argument and think it was coming from Epicurus!

Furthermore, FWIW, the second paragraph sounds like some inter-Epicurean debates around this. In the time of Cicero(?) so I'll take that with a big grain of salt...but there may be more support for my anti-cradle argument than I first thought.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 7:44 PM

Todd can you clarify for me what your own current views are as to whether "pleasure" is the highest good, and the role of "reason" in the establishment of truth?

If we were clear on those things that might help light the way toward making some progress.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 7:44 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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

"I" here, I presume is Torquatus. He hardly even sounds like an Epicurean. They're talking about pleasure, and he's like, well, I agree with the people who think there are good arguments on both sides, blah, blah, blah. So we shouldn't be overconfident. Oh, but we need to be sure to use the most elaborate reasonings! (At least he wants to use them carefully!)

This guy is a joke. Next.

If this is the best evidence we have for the cradle argument, then I'm getting ready to declare victory. I bet Epicurus never used any such argument. Maybe he said something like, "Its pleasure. Not open for discussion." But maybe he didn't try to drag the babies into it after all.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 7:47 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Todd can you clarify for me what your own current views are as to whether "pleasure" is the highest good, and the role of "reason" in the establishment of truth?

Easy.

- 1) Pleasure is the highest good.
- 2) The role of reason is to interpret the data provided by the senses.

"Interpret" might be doing a lot of work there, I would include making judgements of value as part of that - deciding what pleasures are to be chosen or avoided, for example.

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 7:49 PM

And how do YOU arrive at the conclusion that pleasure is the highest good?

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 7:58 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And how do YOU arrive at the conclusion that pleasure is the highest good?

Well, I haven't been thinking about it in terms of the highest good, but that's a good idea.

Off the top of my head, I'd say pleasure is the highest good because for any other good, you can always ask why is it good, and you should get an answer. When you get to "because it gives me pleasure", that's the end of the line.

Hmm...maybe that's all that's necessary?

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 8:03 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

Well, I haven't been thinking about it in terms of the highest good, but that's a good idea.

It's interesting that you seem not to have read the full or main part of the Torquatus dialog. Probably you'll have much more to say when you do!

[Quote from Todd](#)

Hmm...maybe that's all that's necessary?

I might agree with you on that, but I think Epicurus would say that ultimately it is important to take a stand on what is "objectively" the highest good, and not just rely on what you or others think personally to be the case. I would say that is probably why we are having the debate about how to tie this opinion to Nature.

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 8:39 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It's interesting that you seem not to have read the full or main part of the Torquatus dialog. Probably you'll have much more to say when you do!

I have not read Torquatus in a long time, maybe never. If I once did, it was before I had any interest in Epicurus. I guess I will have to remedy this deficiency before I take up more of your

time.

Post by “Charles” of December 20, 2022 at 8:40 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

I don't see any references to babies or animals in either the PD or the Letter to Menoeceus. Of course that doesn't prove Epicurus didn't use the cradle argument. But the case remains open!

The best source for this is actually from Diogenes Laertius.

Quote

A further difference from the Cyrenaics: they thought that bodily pains were worse than those of the soul, and pointed out that offenses are visited by bodily punishment. But Epicurus held that the pains of the soul are worse, for the flesh is only troubled for the moment, but the soul for past, present, and future. In the same way the pleasures of the soul are greater. ***As proof that pleasure is the end, he points out that all living creatures as soon as they are born take delight in pleasure, but resist pain by a natural impulse apart from reason.*** Therefore we avoid pain by instinct, just as Heracles, when he is being devoured by the shirt of Nessus, cries aloud,

Post by “Cassius” of December 20, 2022 at 8:44 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

If I once did, it was before I had any interest in Epicurus. I guess I will have to remedy this deficiency before I take up more of your time.

No, no, don't let that hold you back at all -- I always see something new in them everytime I read i, so I am just letting you know that there's a lot more controversy where the part you've already quoted comes from!

Post by “Todd” of December 20, 2022 at 8:45 PM

Thanks, [Charles](#). I did scan through DL a few minutes ago, but I didn't catch that line.

I actually have no problem with that formulation either. He's stating it as a simple data point, like [Don](#) was.

Maybe I just have an issue with the the Torquatus language, and the implication that we should *only* look at newborns and animals because mature humans are too corrupt.

Post by “Don” of December 20, 2022 at 11:52 PM

I found this Vatican Saying interesting, translated by Saint-Andre:

60. Everyone departs from life just as they were when newly born.

πᾶς ὡσπερ ἄρτι γεγονῶς ἐκ τοῦ ζῆν ἀπέρχεται.

[NOTE] This saying is a bit cryptic. Some translations render it almost as meaning that the soul is born again at death, but clearly that would be at odds with the rest of what Epicurus says (e.g., Principal Doctrine #2). I take it to mean that human beings do not change throughout life in their essential needs: a person who is dying, just like a newborn baby, needs only to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold .

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 7:06 AM

As per the title, of this thread, I think I have reached a final conclusion:

PLEASURE IS NOT THE HIGHEST GOOD! (click-bait, but bear with me)

Pleasure is not a good at all.

Pleasure is the standard by which all other things are judged to be good.

Nature knows nothing of good or bad. Nature gave us only pleasure and pain as standards.

To ask if pleasure is the highest good is making a category error - like asking if a horse is faster than time.

To say pleasure is the highest good is not to advocate hedonism, it is to undermine it. It is demoting pleasure to the realm of goods, where it is merely one of many. Maybe the highest or greatest, but still one of many.

Epicurean philosophy should reject the entire concept of the highest good.

Note: DeWitt has a section titled "The Summum Bonum Fallacy", which I have probably read dozens of times, but I never got the impression that this was what he was talking about. Will have to re-read with this in mind and see.

Post by “Don” of December 21, 2022 at 7:27 AM

LOL! I like your "clickbait" caveat 😊

I was with you up until the end but let me try to at least explain why I don't *fully* embrace your post there.

I see your reference to DeWitt's "summum bonum fallacy" and I've expressed my skepticism for that DeWittian idea before on the forum. As I remember her rests his argument on the fact that Latin doesn't have a definite article and that always seemed weak to me.

I also think that many times (myself included) have equated English "highest good" as "the best good." While "summum" means 'top, summit' I don't interpret that as "best" as in quality. It's the "good" that's reached at the end, it's the good to which will other goods point. Metaphorically, if you're walking up the path past all other goods asking "What is behind this? Why do I do this?" You'll end up finding at the summit the moving toward pleasure (and avoiding pain).

All the ancient philosophies asked the question "What is it to which all goods point?" Epicurus had an answer, and a powerful one.

I've explained my take on this in my commentary to Book 1 of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics:

[Epicurean Sage - Nichomachean Ethics Book 1](#)

< Back to Nichomachean Ethics homepage
Nichomachean Ethics starts out with: "Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or...
sites.google.com

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 7:41 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I was with you up until the end but let me try to at least explain why I don't *fully* embrace your post there.

I'm not exactly clear where we part ways.

If you're with me up to "pleasure is a standard, not a good"...but you still want to talk about pleasure as if it's a good?

Your metaphor seems unobjectionable to me, as metaphors are imprecise by nature. It makes a nice visual. But I'd still say the thing you find at the summit is not of the same category as the things along the way. And I think it confuses things (ref. this thread) to talk about them as if they are similars. For me at least, that realization clarified many things.

From a historical perspective, I think the highest good idea was a relic of idealism (probably can't even blame Plato for that one) that crept in unnoticed. Maybe an example of "you become what you fight".

Also, I'm not endorsing DeWitt on this topic (yet, at least). Need to read that too.

(Haven't read your commentary yet either...will do so now.)

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 8:13 AM

Aristotle seems to be putting the cart before the horse. He just takes for granted that all these different things are goods, and sets about investigating, in Aristotle fashion, which is the ultimate one.

I don't think I'm going to budge on this. Pleasure isn't just a good. You can't even talk about goods until you have a standard to determine what is a good anyway.

Maybe this is just a semantic disagreement, but I think the clarity of the terminology is important when we want to make further claims. Treating pleasure as a good isn't going to be helpful there.

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 8:37 AM

But I don't think it is merely semantic. I think it's also procedural, as the Aristotle example illustrates.

You don't just have a bunch of things lying around that you call goods, one of which happens to be pleasure. And you start classifying them.

You have to START with identifying pleasure as something special, and work from there.

Post by “Cassius” of December 21, 2022 at 8:40 AM

Several good recent posts there, and I want to think more about what Todd is saying but I think he's got an interesting approach. We have talked regularly about it being more appropriate to talk about pleasure as the "Guide" rather than "the good" - along the lines of Lucretius' "Diva voluptus, dux vitae" / divine pleasure GUIDE of life. I think Todd may be sensing the same issue.

[Quote from Todd](#)

Pleasure isn't just a good. You can't even talk about goods until you have a standard to determine what is a good anyway.

Yes. Pleasure is more than anything else one of the two FEELINGS. A feeling has both aspects at least in the way we think of it, as both a guide and good in itself. If you abstract it too far into some "definition" of the good it loses its meaning.

I also want to memorialize a couple of thoughts on earlier posts, primarily, the issue Todd raised about whether pointing to babies is the most sound argument, and then Charles saying that we really need to be looking at this in terms of what is persuasive.

I continue to think that we should look at Lucretius' poem as not just "physics" but what we call it in the intro to the podcast, something like "the only surviving complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world." (Caveat - I still want to explore Emily Austin's suggestion that there was a final section of the original plague of Athens story that is missing and would have made a great finale.)

Whether Torquatus has his statement about Epicurus refusing to look to elaborate logical argument or not, it does seem pretty clear that he preferred arguments that go directly to the senses in a "seeing is believing sense." The best and most persuasive argument is "Look at what is right there in front of you."

And if we look at Lucretius I think it is easy to see the "hymn to venus" as not some flight of poetic fancy, but exactly such a "look there" argument. Lucretius never gives an elaborate logical argument for pleasure as the guide of life. But he does start off at the very beginning of his poem with what is essentially a "Look there!" --

Quote from Lucretius - Brown Translation

MOTHER of Rome, Delight of Men and Gods, Sweet Venus; who with vital power does fill the sea bearing the ships, the fruitful Earth, all things beneath the rolling signs of Heaven; for it is by Thee that creatures of every kind conceive, rise into life, and view the Sun's bright beams. Thee, Goddess, Thee the winds avoid; the clouds fly Thee and Thy approach. With various art the Earth, for Thee, affords her sweetest flowers; for Thee the sea's rough waves put on their smiles, and the smooth sky shines with diffused light. For when the buxom Spring leads on the year, and genial gales of western winds blow fresh, unlocked from Winter's cold, the airy birds first feel Thee, Goddess, and express thy power. Thy active flame strikes through their very souls. And then the savage beasts, with wanton play, frisk over the cheerful fields, and swim the rapid streams. So pleased with thy sweetness, so transported by thy soft charms, all living Nature strives, with sharp desire, to follow Thee, her Guide, where Thou art pleased to lead. In short, Thy power, inspiring every breast with tender love, drives every creature on with eager heat, in seas, in mountains, in swiftest floods, in leafy forests, and in verdant plains, to propagate their kind from age to age. [21] Since Thou, alone, doest govern Nature's laws, and nothing, without Thee, can rise to light, without Thee nothing can look gay or lovely;

And I have one more thing to say about babies. Todd points out that it is questionable to look *only* at babies for data. We've also discussed that no could credibly suggest that we want to go back to an infantile state of existence in general, totally dependent on others and with very little ability to judge how to successfully avoid pain and pursue pleasure.

But there *is* one aspect of babies and the young of all species that I do think that Epicurus would have endorsed, and that is the absolute lack of doubt in the mind of infants that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the prime directive of nature. The "perversion" or "corruption" after that which is referenced in Torquatus is obviously not in

every respect. As our minds mature we gain the ability to judge better and successfully pursue pleasure and avoid pain. But the way in which we often *do* get corrupted and perverted is that we are seduced by priests and supernatural religion and false philosophers who talk of "true worlds" beyond this one. We are infected by their poison and we lose our confidence in nature as providing the clear standard of feeling as the only way to ultimately base our decisions on as to what to choose and avoid.

So at the very least I do think that Epicurus would have compared the single-mindedness of new-born youth against the corruption that comes from religion and false philosophic influences that are primarily external and that turn us away from confidence that nature has provided pleasure and pain as our guides.

Post by "Don" of December 21, 2022 at 8:57 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

I don't think I'm going to budge on this.

I respect your conviction.

[Quote from Todd](#)

Pleasure isn't just a good.

What would you call it then? And that's not meant as sarcasm! I'm just wanting to see what word you'd use to describe it.

[Quote from Todd](#)

You can't even talk about goods until you have a standard to determine what is a good anyway.

I've found it instructive to always go back to the source texts and the words used. When anyone - Aristotle, Epicurus, et al. - talked about "good" or "the good" as it's uniformly translated into English, the words used are αγαθός (agathos) "good" and τᾱγαθον (tagathon, basically the previous word with the definite article "the" bound to it) "the good."

I looked at the LSJ (THE standard reference for ancient Greek) definition for αγαθός:

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀγα^θός](#)

What I found instructive was the various connotations of that word:

II. of things,

1. good, serviceable

2. of outward circumstances, to good purpose,

3. morally good

4. ἀγαθόν, τό, good, blessing, benefit, of persons or things; as term of endearment for a baby, blessing!, treasure!; confer a benefit on . . . , :—in pl., ἀγαθά, τά, goods of fortune, treasures, wealth; “ἀγαθὰ πράττειν” fare well; also, good things, dainties: good qualities; good points, of a horse.

To me, what it's getting at are "What things in life or this world confer benefit? What do we consider to provide a service to us?"

With these connotations, Epicurus seems to me to say wisdom, morality, and justice are goods because they provide the benefit of our living pleasurable lives.

But they aren't the end of goods. Pleasure is that to which all other goods point or end up - all other things that provide benefit to our lives ultimately do so because they provide us with pleasure.

So he uses ταγαθον when he talks about the expansiveness of pleasure here:

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

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 8:58 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And I have one more thing to say about babies.

I feel like the cradle argument is now sort of a distraction from a more important issue. But since you brought it up, I will summarize my current view on that too.

The concept of the argument appears to be fine. I'm a bit hesitant to fully endorse it, because someone hearing the argument might make some inferences that I would not approve of.

The issue to me is WHY are we looking at babies? If the answer is because they're a simple, easy-to-understand, real-life example that we can extrapolate to more advanced humans, then that is perfectly fine.

If the answer starts hinting at purity, uncorruption, unbiased, superiority, etc. In other words, if they are held up as an IDEAL, then that is a problem. I see this as another example of idealism being snuck in via the back door.

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 9:05 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

What would you call it then? And that's not meant as sarcasm! I'm just wanting to see what word you'd use to describe it.

I would call pleasure a feeling, first and foremost.

Then, for the purpose of this discussion, I would go on to say that pleasure (the feeling) is nature's standard for judging what is good.

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 9:09 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

In other words, if they are held up as an IDEAL, then that is a problem

It's a problem for the same reason I don't want to think of pleasure as a good.

By what standard have you chosen to single out this one part of nature to use as a norm? Nature is everything.

See, you must have a standard when you're doing that. And you do have one. You're just not thinking about what it is. The standard you are using is that nature in its original state is superior to nature as it has been changed by humans. Now, you may well be right in the case of any particular change. But to elevate that to the level of a principle is a philosophy of poverty and death.

And sure, you can try to save the argument by saying you only look to babies as an ideal in this one particular respect, which maybe I will agree that you are right about. But we're relying on a lot of reasoning to get to this point. Is this really the best way to establish a foundational principle of Epicurean philosophy?

Last edit, I promise: when I keep saying "you" there, especially wrt not thinking, I don't mean you, Cassius, or anyone else here. In general, when people are making these kind of arguments.

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 10:37 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I've found it instructive to always go back to the source texts and the words used

If your goal is to understand someone else, what choice do you have?

But I'm not trying to understand someone else right now (mostly), I'm trying to clarify my own ideas. Introducing foreign words with different shades meaning doesn't seem helpful.

To me, "good" is a simple word. Whether you say "some goods", "very good," "good job," "a good," "the good," "the highest good." To me, those all have nearly identical meanings and connotations. (They are things that provide pleasure.) I'm happy to throw all those forms around without having to make fine distinctions and endless clarifications about what kind of "good" I'm talking about in a given context.

Edit: I feel like I'm taking the Epicurean approach here.

That why pleasure needs to be separate. Otherwise it would be a circular definition.

Now, if you are saying there is something in Aristotle that I need to understand that will help me, that is another thing. Is that what you are saying?

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 21, 2022 at 10:57 AM

I concur with @Don's approach to this discussion insofar as acknowledging the difference Epicurus delineates between ΑΓΑΘΟΣ , which refers to instrumental objectives that further an

individual toward a greater goal, versus ΤΑΓΑΘΟΝ, which *is* the greater goal of life (*for which the former objectives are merely instruments*).

I agree that Pleasure is not "a good", in that it would be inappropriate within the context of Epicurus' teachings to place "a good" in the same category as "The Good". Pleasure is The End, and the virtues are means by which to acquire that end.

Keep in mind, as well, that Epicurus refers to Pleasure as the "first Good" and "the beginning and end of the blessed life", but, he reserves the "*highest* good" for "prudence" (or "practical wisdom"). While translators throw around "good", "goods", "Good", and "The Good" somewhat ambivalently, Epicurus distinguishes all of the other "goods" (typically identified as "virtues"), including the "highest good" (being "prudence", the most important virtue) from "The Good" (which is not a virtue, but The Goal). As Epicurus writes to Menoikeus, "it is to obtain this end that we always act".

Post by “Todd” of December 21, 2022 at 11:05 AM

But don't you think all these different meanings of "good" is contributing to the problem?

Of course, we do need to untangle all that and understand what Epicurus was actually saying. Definitely.

But I think we need better terminology if we're planning to make any kind of outreach.