

Pleasure vs pain - example and thoughts!

Post by "ThinkingCat" of May 20, 2023 at 4:02 AM

Here is a quote from Cassius which someone posted which is really helpful but it raised some questions in my mind:

Epicurus was into "pleasure" and that can come in many ways, simple and luxurious, and the trick is to manoeuvre through your personal context to focus on pleasures that do not cause you more pain than you are willing to experience for the sake of those pleasures.

I understand this and agree with it, it makes good sense but it got me thinking. People are willing to develop all kinds of what I would deem as unhealthy behaviours that give them pleasure but cause pain yet they would argue the pain is nominal and the pleasure gained outweighs it. I realise the key here is "what I would deem as" but I'll continue. For example, someone I work with likes to do cocaine 'on special occasions'. Before I go further, I don't drink or do any drugs, my stance is life is better without either but I realise there will be people who drink on this forum (or maybe do drugs?!) so I'm not here to start a war with you ☐☐☐

Anyway my colleague is willing to do cocaine and will go through the come down afterwards because he argue's that the pleasure outweighs the pain. Of course at some point, he might become addicted to cocaine so the pain factor would kick in then. But he argues that he doesn't have an addictive personality type and only does cocaine on special occasions. It could be argued in this scenario that he is being Epicurean?! Thoughts!

Post by "Cassius" of May 20, 2023 at 7:10 AM

Just to help start the discussion, this is a great question, and gets into the "objective vs subjective" discussion that Emily Austin raises in Chapter 3 of her book.

It also raises issues of how "sound mind in a sound body" and our discussions of pleasure as including healthy functioning of the organism (the "hand" argument from Torquatus) are relevant.

And not at all the least, it raises [PD10](#)

[PD10](#). If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves

full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 20, 2023 at 8:58 AM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

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Perhaps the special occasions are not feeling special enough for your colleague...and that he is already addicted to that one way of making things more special. Also, I would guess that there must be something missing for him and that is why he does it...and the thing which is missing (a basic human need) is the sense of friendship and enjoyment that comes from being with people whom he loves and who love him.

Another issue: there is most likely an inner sense of "dis-ease" because he cannot be entirely sure that he won't become addicted in the future (but I would say he is already addicted now).

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 20, 2023 at 10:11 AM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

Anyway my colleague is willing to do cocaine and will go through the come down afterwards because he argue's that the pleasure outweighs the pain. [...] It could be argued in this scenario that he is being Epicurean?! Thoughts!

Recreational drug use is a natural desire, though unnecessary. If he has performed the appropriate *συμμέτρησης* (*weighing advantages versus disadvantages*) and has determined that the high is worth the crash, then it's worth it.

There are a few considerations to cocaine use. First, Epicurus generally recommends against intoxication:

"The wise man will never indulge in drunkenness, says Epicurus, in his Banquet." (Wise Man Saying 13)

Cocaine intoxication stresses the cardiovascular system. At the same time, it tends to provide users with more utility than do depressants (like alcohol.) Beyond a heightened state of alertness that can propel someone to accomplish more tasks, cocaine has been demonstrated to enhance creativity by reinforcing divergent thinking. Of course, long-term, habitual use of the chemical can lead to permanent health complications that should be considered, and withdrawal symptoms (*feeling like bugs are crawling under your skin*) may weigh the scale against usage.

Epicurus provides another parameter we should consider:

"[S]elf-sufficiency we believe to be a great good, not that we may live on little under all circumstances but that we may be content with little when we do not have plenty, being genuinely convinced that they enjoy luxury most who feel the least need of it" (Epistle To Menoikeus).

Unfortunately for users, cocaine is one of the more expensive drugs, and generally harder to acquire a quality product. Unlike alcohol, which is cheap and ubiquitous, a cocaine habit is much harder to maintain due to socioeconomic factors. The habit depends on availability, and the availability is further determined by affordability. While cocaine might stimulate him in a pleasurable way, there are healthier (and cheaper) ways to achieve a similar high. Additionally, withdrawal symptoms make it harder to focus and generally maintain a healthy equilibrium.

There are also legal consequences to consider:

"It is impossible for the man who secretly violates any article of the social compact to feel confident that he will remain undiscovered, even if he has already escaped ten thousand times; for until his death he is never sure he will not be detected." (Key Doctrine 35)

"The wise man will not object to go to the courts of law." (Wise Man Saying 19)

The federal statute on limitation for illegal drug use is 5 years, and, depending on your location, and the temperament of law enforcement in your area, using cocaine may make you a target, or an easy arrest. Furthermore, having a record that includes possession charges can complicate future legal struggles. Of course, this is not necessarily a problem if you are a member of the upper class, as law enforcement overwhelmingly targets poor communities.

"[Epicurus] asks himself in his *Problems* whether the Sage who knows that he will not be found out will do certain things that the laws forbid. He answers, 'an unqualified prediction is not free of difficulty' - which means, 'I shall do it but I do not wish to admit it.' (Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, 34, p. 1127D)

The law is not absolute and is not necessarily just, and it is up to each of us to determine what is best for ourselves. Overall, I think rare cocaine use is generally fine in healthy adults, of course, *to each their own*.

"Provided that you do not break the laws or good customs and do not distress any of your neighbors or do harm to your body or squander your pittance, you may indulge your inclination as you please." (Vatican Saying 51)

Post by "Don" of May 20, 2023 at 10:46 AM

I have thoughts on the thread topic but wanted to reply to the quote..

[Quote from Nate](#)

"The wise man will never indulge in drunkenness, says Epicurus, in his Banquet." (Wise Man Saying 13)

My translation: Even when drunk, the wise one will not talk nonsense or act silly.

Hicks: Nor will he drivel, when drunken: so Epicurus says in the Symposium.

Yonge: Nor will he ever indulge in drunkenness, says Epicurus, in his Banquet,

Mensch: He will not talk nonsense when drunk.

Is the emphasis here on the drunkenness or the "drivel" (to talk stupidly or carelessly)?

Let's check the original text:

οὐδὲ μὴν ληρήσειν ἐν μέθῃ ...

- ληρήσειν "be foolish or silly, speak or act foolishly"
- ἐν μέθῃ "when drunk" (literally, "in strong drink, in drunkenness")
- "Nor, truly, will they act or speak silly in drunkenness..."

So, technically, the wise one can get drunk, but they need to be careful how they act. The fact that this characteristic is an excerpt from Epicurus's *Symposium* (Συμπόσιον) which is a

banquet or drinking party, is interesting. Chances are attendees were getting drunk and acting silly. To me, Epicurus is saying, "Go ahead and drink, but, *Paian Anax*, don't act the fool!" (According to Normal DeWitt, Epicurus liked to pepper his writings with names of the gods, Paian Anax "Lord Apollo" was one of his favorites.)

Post by "Don" of May 20, 2023 at 11:55 AM

Back to the topic of the thread:

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

Anyway my colleague is willing to do cocaine and will go through the come down afterwards because he argues that the pleasure outweighs the pain. Of course at some point, he might become addicted to cocaine so the pain factor would kick in then. But he argues that he doesn't have an addictive personality type and only does cocaine on special occasions. It could be argued in this scenario that he is being Epicurean?! Thoughts!

Right off the bat, I can't say whether your colleague is "being Epicurean" or not. Just saying you're doing something for the "pleasure" of it strikes me as being more generally "hedonistic" than strictly Epicurean. Around here at least, that capital-E Epicurean brings along a lot more than simply doing something for the pleasure it provides.

On a deeper level, [Cassius](#) (& others here) and I have had some "knock-down drag-out fights" 😊 over the years concerning the interpretation of [PD10](#) as well as the section in the [Letter to Menoikeus](#) about "the pleasure of those who are prodigal." I have refined my views on that Principal Doctrine thanks to those "discussions."

I maintain that it's not an activity, in and of itself, that is objectionable to Epicurus's philosophy but the consequences. It is of paramount importance to **always** adhere to [VS71](#): *Ask this question of every desire: what will happen to me if the object of desire is achieved, and what if not?* @Nate 's mention of [symmetresis](#) (Great word, btw!!) is a nice one-word summary of that process. One "weighs together" the "What if's?" against each other. Questions for your colleague to ask themselves would include, but not be limited to:

- Does the activity negatively affect his life? Positively affect?
- Are they willing to accept the physical damage to their body?
- What happens if they don't do the drug in the social setting?

- Are friendships damaged if the drug is not partaken of? If partaken of? If so, which of those friendships are important to your well-being?
- As Nate points out: Are you concerned about being caught using an illegal substance? (whether one agrees with the justice of the laws or not, it's still illegal)

And so on...

Epicurus's position seems to me that you can't have a blanket statement *against* a specific activity. Epicurus is all about context. That said, I continue to assert that Epicurus thought it was *better* in the long run to not indulge all the time in "sex, drugs, and rock & roll." Those behaviors and activities have been shown to not be conducive to an overall pleasurable existence due to health and social concerns. He's not laying down a prohibition from on high. He's saying, "Okay, if that's what you want to do. Report back to me on how it's going later, and we'll talk." But, as I pointed out in post #5 above, Epicurus wrote in his *Symposium* (lost except for fragments now 😭) , of which it appears he was a participant in the dialogue, that it was the behavior *arising* from getting drunk that was the problem, not the drinking of wine itself.

[ThinkingCat](#) : You have definitely earned your screen-name. Not only are you obviously thinking yourself; you're getting the rest of us to think as well! Thanks!

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2023 at 12:42 PM

Great replies so far. Another practical factor that should be obvious is the time context. We regularly give people who are dying powerful pain killers, knowing that they are not likely to be around long enough to experience the long term side effects. In fact I would say it would be monstrous NOT to use chemicals to deaden pain out of some concern for "virtue" or that drugs are wrong in and of themselves.

So the situation being evaluated has to consider the full context.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 21, 2023 at 3:51 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It is of paramount importance to *always* adhere to [VS71](#): Ask this question of every desire: what will happen to me if the object of desire is achieved, and what if not?

This is the kind of talk that always makes me tense up. 😡 😞

“Stop calculating, Boss,” Zorba continued. “Forget numbers, break those disgusting scales, close the grocer’s shop.” (Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek* – I am, perhaps helpfully, far more the introvert than Zorba.)

Now, I would not advocate for an “unaware life” – quite the contrary. But neither do I want to be continually working an abacus in my head to calculate, calculate, calculate (nor a set of scales to weigh, and weigh and weigh) – or even to think, think, think. 🤔

I admit (unapologetically) that I have some Cyrenaic tendencies (while recognizing errors in Aristippus’ philosophy that I think Epicurus corrects). And, between the Scilla of ascetism and the Charybdis of tranquillism – as tendencies toward a shipwreck of possible error – I am unlikely to err toward asceticism (though I do value a certain *simplicitas* in how I live).

With that said: although it might be “a bit early,” I’m going to enjoy an afternoon martini (even if it leads to an unplanned nap 😴). 😊

~ ~ ~

Apologies [Don](#) if I am misinterpreting/misrepresenting you here. 😞

Post by “Cassius” of May 21, 2023 at 4:29 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

“Stop calculating, Boss,” Zorba continued. “Forget numbers, break those disgusting scales, close the grocer’s shop.”

Yes if [VS71](#) was saying that in a “logical” / “calculating” way totally, then I think your concern would be valid. But Epicurus makes clear that the only criteria is pleasure and pain, and those are feelings, not widgets or numbers that can be absolutely quantified.

I would even say that that has to be kept in mind in considering the “natural and necessary” evaluation. Other than food, water, shelter, clothing, and a few other things, one’s calculation of what is appropriate to pursue is going to be so contextual as to alleviate any concern of undue

asceticism or rigidity.

If you approach things the right way, rather than thinking you are Plato plotting out the answer through geometry, or that logic will hand everyone the same answers, then you should have any concern that would spoil your martini!

Post by “Don” of May 21, 2023 at 7:05 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Apologies Don if I am misinterpreting/misrepresenting you here. 😞

No apologies necessary, [Pacatus](#). 😊 I can see how what I said might be interpreted that way.

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

But neither do I want to be continually working an abacus in my head to calculate, calculate, calculate (nor a set of scales to weigh, and weigh and weigh) – or even to think, think, think. 🤔

I definitely don't advocate literal calculations like adding up Utilitarian dolor (pain) and hedon (pleasure) points for decision-making. The word used there in Greek for "ask" actually means "one must apply, administer, of instruments or drugs." We use our faculty of choice and rejection like applying a treatment, a tool, or a medicine to our lives.

I think it becomes second nature to apply that idea to decisions. I don't think Epicurus was saying to make a list of pros and cons for every decision every moment. But I do think he was saying to get in the habit of not making rash decisions and such.

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

With that said: although it might be “a bit early,” I’m going to enjoy an afternoon martini (even if it leads to an unplanned nap 😴). 😊

😊👍 Substitute a cold IPA and I'm right there with you!

Post by “Don” of May 21, 2023 at 9:08 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

I admit (unapologetically) that I have some Cyrenaic tendencies (while recognizing errors in Aristippus' philosophy that I think Epicurus corrects)

I was looking closer at your post above and wanted to comment on this. And I'm glad you added "unapologetically"! From my perspective and interpretation, the genius of Epicurus was to include *all* pleasures under his umbrella definition of pleasure. He supposedly said he couldn't imagine The Good (ie, pleasure) "without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms." He urged his students to experience joy and merriment. He talked about the importance of "peace of mind, freedom from pain, and a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature." And more! The Cyrenaics seem to have had a narrow definition of pleasure, but Epicurus understood that pleasures come from a myriad of sources. Having a few "Cyrenaic tendencies" doesn't seem to be a problem for him. If they bring you pleasure with minimal painful consequences, enjoy...unapologetically 😄