

# **How would you respond to an existentialist who says "You Epicureans have chosen pleasure as your meaning but it's not universal" do Epicureans hold that pleasure is the universal Good?**

**Post by "Eoghan Gardiner" of June 13, 2023 at 9:13 AM**

It's hard to phrase the question without it seeming to appeal to some abstraction but I hope it makes sense.

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**Post by "Don" of June 13, 2023 at 10:02 AM**

I would laugh and tell the existential, "Pleasure and pain may be the *only* universals."

*(Maybe that's a little harsh, but that was my first reaction.)*

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**Post by "Little Rocker" of June 13, 2023 at 11:05 AM**

I tend to think Epicurus would respond something like:

Pleasure is the universal motivation, whether the existentialists like it or not. It's a matter of our animal nature. We always act in light of what we take to be most pleasant. (This view is often called 'psychological hedonism').

And yet, humans do not universally accept this truth about our motivations, convincing ourselves we are acting for other reasons because we are prone to false beliefs. So someone can tell themselves all day long they are acting for duty, not pleasure, but that is just a tidy narrative they tell themselves for their own reasons.

As for existentialism, my impression is that there's a sense in which psychological hedonism would not bother many of them, depending on how radically free they consider humans, because Epicurus *does* think we have freedom to choose what is most pleasant. We just don't

have the freedom to choose to act on something other than what we consider most pleasant. So when the existentialists make their existential choices, what they are doing is deliberating about what they consider most pleasant. And that might be enough freedom for many existentialists. If that makes any sense...

I am not, I should say, claiming to be an authority on this matter (especially about existentialism) and it is a contentious question, best addressed, in my opinion, by Raphael Woolf in 'What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?'

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2023 at 11:14 AM

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

We just don't have the freedom to choose to act on something other than what we consider most pleasant.

That reminds me of this from Chapter 14 of A Few Days In Athens:

### [Quote from Frances Wright / A Few Days In Athens](#)

“Does the human mind possess the power to believe or disbelieve, at pleasure, any truths whatsoever?”

“I am not prepared to answer: but I think it does, since it possesses always the power of investigation.”

“But, possibly, not the will to exercise the power. Take care lest I beat you with your own weapons. I thought this very investigation appeared to you a crime.”

“Your logic is too subtle,” said the youth, “for my inexperience.”

“Say rather, my reasoning too close. Did I bear you down with sounding words and weighty authorities, and confound your understanding with hair-drawn distinctions, you would be right to retreat from the battery.”

“I have nothing to object to the fairness of your deductions,” said Theon, “But would not the doctrine be dangerous that should establish our inability to help our belief; and might we not stretch the principle, until we asserted our inability to help our actions?”

“We might, and with reason. But we will not now traverse the ethical *pons asinorum* of necessity — the most simple and evident of moral truths, and the most darkened, tortured, and belabored by moral teachers. You inquire if the doctrine we have essayed to establish, be not dangerous. I reply — not, if it be true. Nothing is so dangerous as error, — nothing so safe as truth. A dangerous truth would be a contradiction in terms, and an anomaly in things.”

“But what is a truth?” said Theon.

“It is pertinently asked. A truth I consider to be an ascertained fact; which truth would be changed into an error, the moment the fact, on which it rested, was disproved.”

“I see, then, no fixed basis for truth.”

“It surely has the most fixed of all — the nature of things. And it is only an imperfect insight into that nature, which occasions all our erroneous conclusions, whether in physics or morals.”

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I have to say my mind is not settled on this. I think I agree with the point that we do not have the freedom to second-guess the senses, and to find for example that sugar is not "sweet" or snow "white" just by trying to do so by willpower.

But is it correct to say that we don't have the freedom to "act" on anything other than what we consider is most pleasant?

My preliminary thought is that the feelings of pleasure and pain are like the senses, and we can't by thinking overrule the judgment of pleasure and pain. But do we not have the freedom to "act" differently than what our feelings tell us? Is that not why we sometimes choose pain rather than pleasure?

At this point, to repeat, I don't have a firm position on this, and I am irritated at Frances Wright that in my reading she is bringing up the question without answering it! 😊

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2023 at 11:21 AM

So my preliminary answer to the question in the thread title would be:

How would you respond to an existentialist who says

1 - "You Epicureans have chosen pleasure as your meaning but it's not universal"

Yes, I can agree that not everyone chooses to hold pleasure to be the meaning of life.

2 - Do Epicureans hold that pleasure is the universal Good?

That requires being clear about what "universal good" is supposed to mean. Epicurus held that Nature has given us only pleasure and pain for determination of what to choose and to avoid. If you accept "universal good" to mean "Nature's directive to all living things" then yes "pleasure" fits that bill. If you want to suggest that there is some other definition of "good" other than the directive Nature gives to all living things, then you've got an entirely different ballgame of persuading that your definitions of "good" and "universal good" are correct.

Edit: In my answer I am attempting to parrot Torquatus, as I am becoming more and more persuaded that the parts Cicero gave to Torquatus to say are probably among the most highly developed statements of Epicurean philosophy that exist. I would see whatever Cicero's source was as along the same lines as Lucretius, representing 200 years more work since the time of Epicurus to refine these formulations:

[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?

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**Post by "Cassius" of June 13, 2023 at 11:38 AM**

Not that what Frances Wright thinks is determinative of anything, but in this quote below, what position is she taking as to (1) "inability to help our belief" and (2) "inability to help our actions"?

Is she saying that we cannot choose to disbelieve what our senses reveal to us, but we can choose to decide how we act upon what the senses reveal? Is she then saying that pleasure and pain are given to us by nature and cannot be second-guessed, but that we can choose to act on other than pleasure and pain? Would she then be disagreeing with the view that "everyone is a psychological hedonist?"

The "with reason" causes me to say that, but then as she continues on it does not seem like she is following up with a clear position. Seems to me that this is a similar question as to what LittleRocker is discussing.

#### [Quote from Frances Wright / A Few Days In Athens](#)

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**Post by "Godfrey" of June 13, 2023 at 3:12 PM**

### [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

We just don't have the freedom to choose to act on something other than what we consider most pleasant.

That's an interesting statement and I've never thought about the Feelings in this way. My first take is that we, as humans, do have the freedom to choose to act on something other than what we consider most pleasant. But doing so will just make us miserable. As Epicureans, we have the good sense to reason correctly and will choose what is the most pleasant.

My second take is: hmmm, maybe we don't have that freedom.... Our reasoning is one of many inputs into the feelings, and faulty reasoning can lead to reactions from the feelings that guide us to misery. The feelings can only react to the input that they receive: garbage in, garbage out.

Third, this is a case in which I would answer that the original question of this thread is an abstraction. We Epicureans believe that the faculty of the Feelings is universal to all organisms and we pursue pleasure as it is Feeling which is the guide toward well-being. To tie this in with the quote above from Little Rocker, I would add that the more aware we are of our sensations and feelings, the more nuance is available to us in our choices and avoidances. The gray area, for me, remains whether we are able to "override" the guidance of our feelings or whether we give too much weight to reason and are simply unaware of our true feelings.

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### **Post by “Little Rocker” of June 13, 2023 at 3:32 PM**

Yeah, I definitely think it's an open question whether Epicurus thinks we are free to act on something other than what we consider most pleasant, so I agree with Godfrey that we might find ourselves pulled in both directions. The passage Cassius mentions from Torquatus definitely attributes psychological hedonism to Epicurus (we simply act on what we find most pleasant--we can just tell ourselves other stories). But there are some people who think Cicero is wrong about Epicurean psychological hedonism, and they usually point to KD 25, which seems to suggest that a person can act with reference to a goal other than pleasure. The people who think Epicurus believes we can act contrary to pleasure (but we shouldn't) are usually called 'ethical hedonists.'

I should add that I think Epicurus thinks we can still act for pleasure while choosing pain, but only when we think the pain leads to more pleasure overall. So we're still doing what we consider most pleasant.

## Post by “Pacatus” of June 13, 2023 at 4:07 PM

What the existentialists get right (in my view):

1. Existence precedes essence. That is, there is no “view from nowhere” (no “god’s-eye view”) from which anyone (e.g., Plato) can confidently declare some universal ideals.

Better called “perspectivism” perhaps, the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega-y-Gasset made this painstakingly clear in his (painstaking) lectures that made up his book *What is Philosophy*. His aphorism expressing this is “*Yo soy yo, y mi circunstancia*” – “I am I, and my circumstance (situation/existential reality).”

2. The universe does not disclose meaning, only evidence, facts and patterns. It was the expectation of finding such disclosed meaning, in the face of empirical/existential reality, that Camus labelled “*the absurd*.” (Though Camus later denied he was an existentialist.)

We are the ones responsible for deciding “meaning” – and that always within the limits of our existential perspectives.

Well, that’s it for me and the existentialists ... 😞

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## Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of June 13, 2023 at 4:35 PM

I don't think Epicureans and existentialists are at odds really, I think the ultimate reality of choosing your own essence is ultimately gonna end up the same as what is most pleasurable (Existentialists are heavily influenced by phenomenologists as well which tries not to abstract so much as far as I know..)

You exist but what you are isn't predefined, unlike Plato and other religions. We could say we exist but what is most pleasurable for me isn't pre decided for the most part (even existentialists would say that we are still constrained by our natural needs etc..) instead I discover what's most pleasurable for myself and decide myself.

Edit: In hindsight I don't think an existentialist would even ask the question I posited.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of June 13, 2023 at 4:44 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3119-how-would-you-respond-to-an-existentialist-who-says-you-epicureans-have-chosen-p/>

[Eoghan Gardiner:](#)

What about "existential angst" and Sartre's "hell is other people"? (I'm sure you are far better read than I am here, and I don't intend these as argumentative questions.)

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### **Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of June 13, 2023 at 4:56 PM**

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Eoghan Gardiner:](#)

What about "existential angst" and Sartre's "hell is other people"? (I'm sure you are far better read than I am here, and I don't intend these as argumentative questions.)

Sartre mean't something else by that phrase, he was a big fan of being with his friends (especially his long term partner Simone who is also a philosopher) they sat around Cafes, pubs etc.. talking philosophy.

I don't 100% understand what he means by this phrase but it has something to do with another persons perception of you being like hell as that perception is ontologically within in them.

The idea of "the other" aka another person was a big thing for him, tbh I doubt I am more well read I am just reading through Sartre recently this year.

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### **Post by “Pacatus” of June 13, 2023 at 5:26 PM**

[Eoghan Gardiner](#)

Maybe his play "No Exit" (from long-ago memory) gives some clues about being with friends (in the Epicurean vein?) aa opposed to just "other people" who might see you as an object in their world? 😏 😊

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### **Post by “Root304” of June 15, 2023 at 12:36 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3119-how-would-you-respond-to-an-existentialist-who-says-you-epicureans-have-chosen-p/>

"Pleasure" is so nuanced in Epicureanism, and in my own contemplation in using the Canon, that I really don't attempt to engage in debate with people about "the Good" being Pleasure. I usually begin with the intricacies of the Canon and physics versus other forms of reasoning, if I am going to debate or discuss in mixed settings. Though when I am with my Epicurean friends who already understand, or just people that really understand emotions, we talk a lot about pleasure being the ultimate good.