

Practical Pleasure-Pain Perspectives: How Different is 99% Pleasure From 100% Pleasure?

Post by “Cassius” of October 5, 2023 at 12:06 PM

I'd like to use this as a starting point to ask a new question:

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Basically I'm toying with the idea that k/k may not deserve the amount of attention that it gets. My thinking is that k/k is really just a way of describing duration, and we don't have any existing texts from Epicurus to which would give it any more importance.

An existing text that we do have is [PD09](#). I'm currently interpreting it as defining the three components of pleasure as intensity, duration and location. The more I think on it, the more useful these seem to be for working with maximizing one's pleasure. And if I'm interpreting [PD09](#) correctly, which is open to debate, then to my mind it has more relevance than the texts dealing with k/k, as it is directly attributed to Epicurus.

So I'm suggesting that the three components of pleasure as described in [PD09](#) are a more valuable topic of study than katastematic and kinetic pleasure. As far as I can tell, [PD09](#) has been pretty much ignored, possibly due to its confusing wording, while k/k is the subject of endless, and endlessly open-ended, discussion. And I'm wondering if the focus on k/k is more useful to opponents of Epicurus than to practicing Epicureans.

Regardless of whether the topic of k/k pleasure is a blessing or a curse, I would like to put that aside for the moment and address what I think is a more basic question.

It seems to me that we are often not very clear when we are discussing "pleasure" as to whether what we are referring to is (1) any number of individual discrete experiences that occur at the same time (such as my being aware that my tooth is hurting at the same time I am aware that I am pleased to be talking with a friend) or (2) some kind of a "sum" of all experiences lumped together into one statement.

I think that people are often talking about pleasure as if it is (2) when they should first be examining the issue under the framework of (1).

I ask this because I would suggest we evaluate the quote currently at the top of the forum (Torquatus' "whatever is free from pain is in pleasure"), and compare it to a statement most

people seem to agree is authentic Epicurus (Diogenes Laertius 22): "The disease in my bladder and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their natural severity: but against all this is the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you."

I find it impossible to interpret this statement in his letter to Idomeneus as anything other than a statement by Epicurus that he is able to walk and chew gum at the same time: he is able to feel pain in one part of his experience (his abdomen) at the same time that he is able to feel pleasure in another part of his experience (his mind). Is this not a statement that what Epicurus is doing is offsetting one against the other that he is both feeling simultaneously?

I do not think that this conflicts with [PD03](#) ("Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.") because he is not saying that either his mind or his abdomen experience both pain and pleasure at the same location at the same time. These are different locations and sources of pain/pleasure - the "wherever" - and the overall common sense context that we can feel numbers of different things simultaneously explains why both can be going on at the same time.

Likewise, Torquatus says: "*Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain,*" (On Ends Book 1:38) Torquatus further says "*Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains.*" Torquatus continues in the same balancing vein with: *And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.* (On Ends Book 1:62)

Do these passages not establish clearly that the Epicureans are presuming that life is continually a combination of pleasurable feelings and painful feelings, often occurring simultaneously in different parts of a person's full experience, and that through philosophy our goal should be to continually produce a preponderance of pleasure over pain?

Most of us will agree (I believe) that Epicurus would say that having 100% of our experience composed of pleasures would be desirable. Most of us I again believe would agree with that proposition as being a theoretical limit to how good life could be. I doubt many of us would argue that life should be 200% pleasure -- and I doubt that even entertaining that proposition would make any sense at all.

What does make sense is that like Epicurus, sometimes we can find mental pleasures to offset physical pains, and sometimes we can find physical pleasures to offset mental pains, not to mention physical pleasures offsetting physical pains and mental pleasures offsetting mental pains. Is that not our common experience as human beings?

If all that is the case does not "absence of pain" really means "absence of any experiences of pains - meaning discrete experiences of pain?"

And whether we refer to painlessness as aponia or ataraxia or any other word we choose, does not "pure pleasure" or "100% pleasure" simply mean "all my experiences over the time period being considered are pleasurable."

If these propositions are correct, I think they support the conclusion that in referring to "the limit of pleasure" Epicurus was in no way referring to a unique experience that everyone experiences in the same way. Is Epicurus not more likely to be saying that 100% pleasure (which is the same as saying 0% pain) is not different in kind or type from the experience of 99% pleasure, and the difference exists only in the 1% degree of pain that still remains, whatever that pain (or pains) might be?

Is there any reason to think that there is a "big bang" when that last 1% is finally eliminated? Is there any reason to think that looking for a "total elimination of pain" serves as more than a theoretical limit that helps us target how to get from where we are to a better place of even more pleasures and fewer pains? I would say "No." The perfect is not the enemy of the good, and there is nothing magical at all about getting from 99% pleasures to 100% pleasures.

Eliminating that extra 1% is desirable, but by no means is obsessing over the final 1% the exclusive object of Epicurus' advice. Nor is eliminating that final 1% in any way a justification for pursuing a life of asceticism or minimalism. If you yourself judge that the particular combination of 99% experiences that you believe worth pursuing is worth the cost of that 1% of your life encumbered by pains, then why not take what you can get and be satisfied that you have lived a great life even if it had a few irritations?

Just as we should be weighing "pleasure" in terms of duration, location, and intensity, as Godfrey's post (I think rightly) suggests, we should then move to the next step of the evaluation: All sorts of feelings of varying duration, location, and intensity are registering in our lives at any particular moment (or over our lifetime).

The most logical and common sense way of understanding what Epicurus is saying is that in the same way that there's no god in heaven writing a report card and giving us a "pass" or "fail" grade on the sum of our lives, there's also no mystical or difficult-to-understand experience that only he as a Greek intellectual was able to capture in words that the rest of the world finds difficult to comprehend.

Over every time period we can consider, we can personally add up our experiences of pleasure and experiences of pain and talk about which ones predominated. If we wish, we can assign a tag name such as "happy" to describe those periods when pleasures predominates over pains. But we're never doing anything except comparing our pleasurable experiences to our painful experiences and doing our best to increase the predominance of pleasures over pains.

We talk a lot about Epicurus having a "calculus of pleasure" without going much further. I think it would help if we start first with the basic arithmetic and get more familiar with comparing our pleasures to our pains. If we see pleasures and pains as discrete, as Epicurus weighed them against each other on his last day, I think we then see a very practical and easy-to-understand

philosophy. The natural goal is to maximize the predominance of pleasures over pains. No one but us can ultimately judge whether we have done that well because no one else feels what we feel. And as our lives near their ends, no one's opinion about how we spent our lives matters but our own, and we have to be prepared to justify to ourselves - and not to gods or to anyone else - that we have lived well.

Post by “Cassius” of October 5, 2023 at 2:25 PM

I expanded these comments in talking with Titus and I am going to take the liberty of inserting them here as they assist in the conversation.

TITUS:



[Quote from Cassius](#) *"That which is free from pain is in a state of pleasure."*

I definitely agree. Can you describe more precisely what you mean? Does this change anything for you?

Personally, I experienced phases with chronic pain and I can simply enjoy freedom from pain. The fixed vessel gets filled by so many beautiful impressions that there is no need for a hunt for especial amusement.

CASSIUS:

Please comment as you can cause I think this is a very important issue.

Yes, the review of how Torquatus is explaining this to Cicero is changing my perspective. In other words, if you take the position that ALL experiences in life which are not explicitly painful are pleasurable, then your sitting in your chair or whatever else you are doing (if you are not in physical pain) and your thinking about whatever you are thinking (so long as you are not thinking about anything painful) means - without any more information at all - that you are in a state of pleasure. And if you are stating to me flatly that in your present condition of body and mind while sitting in your chair you are feeling no mixture of specific pains, then you are not only in a state of pleasure, you are at the LIMIT of pleasure in your current condition.

There is no way in my mind to understand Torquatus' explanation of Epicurus, especially as to Chrysippus' hand or the host pouring wine for the guest analogy, in any other way.

As DeWitt says, Epicurus is defining the "normal" state of everyday pain-free life - no matter what you are doing - as the height of pleasure. The only reason that anyone can ever be designated as not at the height of pleasure is if they are feeling specific pains of mind or body that they can identify as painful.

It is the identification of the "normal" state - such as Chrysippus' hand - as being pleasurable that allows you to say that unless some specific pain is included in the mix you are at the height of pleasure. Nothing mysterious, nothing exotic, just the simple logic that is involved in observing that if you are feeling anything at all you are feeling either pain or pleasure. Take that to its logical conclusion and you have the realization that every activity which is not painful is pleasurable, and the height or limit of pleasure is just your personal combination of experiences so long as none of those are painful. It is ideal to hit 100% pleasures if you can, but even when you are in bad circumstances you just shoot for as high a percentage of pleasures as you can. Nothing hard to understand at all.

Quote

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[Quote from Titus](#)

Personally, I experienced phases with chronic pain and I can simply enjoy freedom from pain. The fixed vessel gets filled by so many beautiful impressions that there is no need for a hunt for especial amusement.

Yes that is absolutely true, but there is something missing from the statement when people simply focus on "escape from pain" as the reason for making the statement. The basis for any statement describing your condition is that life itself is a pleasure to experience, no matter what you are doing, so long as it isn't painful. It is desirable to remove the pain down to the last drop, but the focus and emphasis is on the pleasure of living, not the irritation of the pain. It is "Pleasure" that is the focus of Epicurus and what makes life worth living, not any aspect of "Pain."

Some are going to say that this is like insisting on saying that the glass is half full rather than half empty, but I do believe that is what Epicurus is doing.

Quote from "Epicurus And His Philosophy" page 240 - Norman DeWitt (emphasis added)

"The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that

the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing."

This is all very simple and common sense, but when people obsess over "katastematic pleasure" or "ataraxia" or otherwise fail to make very clear what they are saying, then most normal people are going to conclude that "absence of pain" is some kind of woo-woo experience of mystical exaltation that "isn't pleasure at all." That's what they keep saying either explicitly or implicitly -- they are using various words for saying that this goal of "painlessness is "not pleasure at all, but the real reason for existence!" What a total inversion of the real meaning!! And it is all because they - like Cicero - refuse to accept the designation that life itself - whenever you are not suffering from some specific pain - is pleasurable!!

From the perspective I am describing, how much more clear can this quote be?

We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain.

These jokers who are saying that you don't experience true pleasure or the real goal of life unless you've removed 100% of pain keep looking for "katastematic pleasure" or "ataraxia" or "aponia" as if it some high-priced drug, when all Torquatus / Epicurus is really saying is that when you aren't for some specific reason in pain, whatever you are doing with your body or thinking with your mind constitutes pleasure!. Rather than having to go looking for some experience that no one can really explain, he's simply saying that however you choose to live your life, unless you're experiencing some specific pain - is an experience of pleasure!

TITUS:



Quote from Cassius That's what they keep saying either explicitly or implicitly -- that this goal of "painlessness is "not pleasure at all, but the real reason for existence! What at total inversion of the real meaning -- and it is all because they refuse to accept that life itself - when you are not suffering from some specific pain - is pleasurable!!

I think there is a comment in the forum from me or I wrote an essay on this topic: When another group e.g. the Buddhists experience their system of thought sometimes working, it's just because they come across the calm ocean of Epicurean Philosophy. Some of other philosophies strategies and habits may coincide with the happy life. Their main mistake is heading for alien/otherworldly experiences instead of to what Nature provides, which will finally keep them unsatisfied.

CASSIUS:

Yes I agree. Life when you are not in pain is in fact pleasurable, even if you are only sitting crosslegged on the floor staring at a candle and chanting a single word over and over.

But why in the world would you ever LIMIT yourself to that!!! If you like reading - read! If you like biking, bike! If you like cooking, cook! If you like playing football, play football! But good God man you've only got a brief time to live - don't be afraid to use it! Why not experience all the innumerable pleasures that are open to you so long as they bring more pleasure than pain!

TITUS:

Quote



[Quote from Cassius](#) *Why not experience all the innumerable pleasures that are open to you so long as they aren't more painful than they are worth!*

I would always start with eliminating pain as far as possible and then moving on according to the pleasure/pain calculus. I'm a relatively frugal, hence in my case it's rather about an openness towards my sensual experience which I gather "by the way" than being excited about exceptionalities.

CASSIUS:

Quote

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[Quote from Titus](#) *I would always start with eliminating pain as far as possible and then moving on*

according to the pleasure/pain calculus. I'm a relatively frugal, hence in my case it's rather about an openness towards my sensual experience which I gather "by the way" than being excited about exceptionalities.

Now there I would say that the "I would always" is a personal preference. Everyone is different and has different priorities and preferences. That takes us back to the "week as Epicurus in pain or week as an uneducated shepherd" hypothetical. Both choices are "legitimate" in that no god or Nature cares which one you choose, but different people are going to make different choices. For the sake of honesty it is essential to respect that the universe doesn't care, and not fall into the mistake of believing that our own choice is a categorical imperative for the universe of all people at large. Only you can decide what is most important to you and what you're going to conclude is the best way to spend your life.

Post by "Cassius" of October 5, 2023 at 2:43 PM

Here's another point on whether this is just the discretion of looking at the glass as half full or half empty:

I don't know about you, but looking at something as half empty and drained is a painful experience, and looking at something as half full with plenty of good experience left to go is a pleasurable experience.

And while the measure of the liquid in terms of quantity may be exactly the same, I can sure as heck feel the pleasure of saying "half full!" as different from the pain of saying "half empty!"

It's not just a word game. In the end I don't care what the precise measure of liquid really is. What I care about is whether I am living a pleasurable or a painful life.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 5, 2023 at 3:26 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

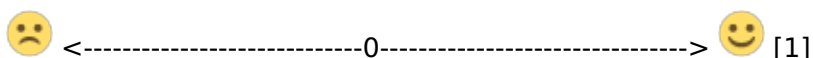
We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may

be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain.

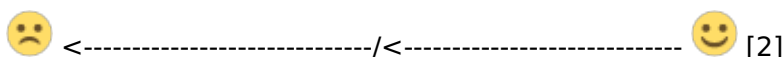
This quote is of major importance in terms of the way that I've been trying to visualize [PD03](#). I had been thinking in terms of the affective circumplex [here]([RE: How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain by Lisa Feldman Barrett](#)) and trying to reconcile that with [PD03](#) by using a graphic representation. What I find puzzling is that pleasure has a maximum, but pain seems capable of increasing until one passes out or dies.

With the circumplex, maximum pleasure are at opposite ends of an axis of affect, the zero point of the axis would be the imaginary "neutral state":

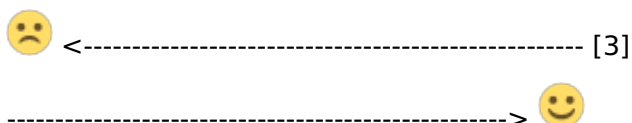
max pain max pleasure



[PD03](#) "The limit of enjoyment is the removal of all pains. Wherever and for however long pleasure is present, there is neither bodily pain nor mental distress." This could imply that if pain decreases to the right in this illustration, the "/" point, where pain is removed, denotes maximum pleasure. But pleasure then decreases to the right from the "/" point, which doesn't seem to make much sense.



Or you could have an illustration where pain and pleasure have an overlapping relationship:



At which point I become totally befuddled, and I realize why Epicurus didn't give mathematicians and geometers any credence: math and geometry aren't very useful for describing biological phenomena. But the quote above is quite concise in describing the relationship of pleasure and pain.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 5, 2023 at 3:32 PM

[PD09](#) "If every pleasure were condensed and were present at the same time and in the whole of one's nature or its primary parts, then the pleasures would never differ from one another."

[Cassius](#) ' description in post 1 does a great job of clarifying this PD as well. It's describing the individual components of pleasures, and at the same time saying that it's pretty unlikely that a

person can experience 100% pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of October 5, 2023 at 3:37 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

At which point I become totally befuddled, and I realize why Epicurus didn't give mathematicians and geometers any credence: math and geometry aren't very useful for describing biological phenomena. But the quote above is quite concise in describing the relationship of pleasure and pain.

Godfrey here I would cite Sedley as saying something important as to the limitations of biology and even psychology in understanding what Epicurus is saying as a philosopher, especially the underlined parts:

Quote

34 DAVID SEDLEY - [EPICURUS' REJECTION OF DETERMINISM](#):

Epicurus' response to this is perhaps the least appreciated aspect of his thought. It was to reject reductionist atomism. Almost uniquely among Greek philosophers he arrived at what is nowadays the unreflective assumption of almost anyone with a smattering of science, that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter; but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth. (The truth that sugar is sweet is not straightforwardly reducible to the truth that it has such and such a molecular structure, even though the latter truth may be required in order to explain the former). By establishing that cognitive scepticism, the direct outcome of reductionist atomism, is self-refuting and untenable in practice, Epicurus justifies his non-reductionist alternative, according to which sensations are true and there are therefore bona fide truths at the phenomenal level accessible through them. The same will apply to the *neti*, which Epicurus also held to be veridical. Pleasure, for example, is a direct datum of experience. It is commonly assumed that Epicurus must have equated pleasure with such and such a kind of movement of soul atoms; but although he will have taken it to have some explanation at the atomic level, I know of no evidence that he, any more than most moral philosophers or psychologists, would have held that an adequate analysis of it could be found at that level. Physics are strikingly absent from Epicurus' ethical writings, and it is curious that interpreters are

so much readier to import them there than they are when it comes to the moral philosophy of Plato or Aristotle.”

I don't think you can get to where Epicurus is going solely through biology or psychology any more than you can get there solely through mathematics or geometry or dialectical logic.

Post by “Cassius” of October 5, 2023 at 6:17 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

clarifying this PD as well. It's describing the individual components of pleasures, and at the same time saying that it's pretty unlikely that a person can experience 100% pleasure.

It certainly does seem to be based on the assumption that we are talking about individual pleasures being the norm, and speculating what would happen if any one of them were expanded in duration, intensity, and location to consume our full experience.

The premise of the whole statement seems to be that the pleasures are not normally so expansive, and that normal state of affairs is that the individual pleasures (and pains) occupy many separate parts of our experience at any one time.

A life of pleasure would seem to be a life composed of many individual pleasures predominating over the many individual pains. This is more attainable for an Epicurean because he or she doesn't have to face the fear of death or gods, he is trained to pursue those activities that are going to bring more pleasure than pain, and he is trained to appreciate that life is short and therefore any part of his mental or physical experience which is not painful is pleasurable.

Post by “Don” of October 5, 2023 at 11:47 PM

I am becoming more convinced that the three contiguous PDs 9, 10, 11 all express counterfactuals the way they're grammatically structured in the ancient Greek, the way they are grouped together, and just the way [PD11](#) reads. Each doctrine is stating an If..

statement that expresses a situation that is counterfactual, "it is not the case that..."

If every pleasure were condensed and were present at the same time and in the whole of one's nature or its primary parts...

But every pleasure cannot be condensed.

If the things that produce the delights of those who are decadent washed away the mind's fears about astronomical phenomena and death and suffering, and furthermore if they taught us the limits of our pains and desires,...

But those things do not wash away the mind's fears.

If our suspicions about astronomical phenomena and about death were nothing to us and troubled us not at all, and if this were also the case regarding our ignorance about the limits of our pains and desires...

But we are troubled by our suspicions ...

Those "If..." statements are setting up that first segment of an argument which is resolved in the "then..." statement. To rephrase...

Every pleasure cannot be condensed, *so pleasures do differ from each other.*

Things that produce the delights of those who are decadent don't wash away the mind's fears, *so they are not filled with every joy and would contain not a single pain or distress.*

We are troubled by our suspicions death and we are ignorant of the limits of pain and desire, *so we have a need for studying what is natural.*

In each of those, the second argument (then...) of switched to its opposite (negative > positive; positive > negative) in rephrasing the full doctrine. This is reinforced for me in looking at [PD11](#).

For reference:

[PD09](#) If every pleasure were condensed and were present at the same time and in the whole of one's nature or its primary parts, then the pleasures would never differ from one another.

[PD10](#) If the things that produce the delights of those who are decadent washed away the mind's fears about astronomical phenomena and death and suffering, and furthermore if they taught us the limits of our pains and desires, then we would have no complaints against them, since they would be filled with every joy and would contain not a single pain or distress (and that's what is bad).

[PD11](#) If our suspicions about astronomical phenomena and about death were nothing to us and troubled us not at all, and if this were also the case regarding our ignorance about the limits of

our pains and desires, then we would have no need for studying what is natural.

Post by “Don” of October 5, 2023 at 11:58 PM

Oh, and by and large I agree with [Cassius](#) et al direction in this thread.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 6, 2023 at 1:51 AM

I interpret these PDs slightly differently, especially [PD09](#). I see each as listing things that Epicurus considers to be of key importance in his ethics, even though they're expressed as counterfactuals.

[Don](#) , the way that you interpret [PD09](#) seems to be the way that many translators interpret it, but to me this is incorrect. I say this as somebody who knows no Greek: I'm reasoning out the ramifications of the English wording as they apply to my experience. I think that it's incorrect to separate "condensed" from "time" and "parts". I think that the conclusion that pleasures differ from one another is common to both interpretations and is correct, but I think that it's incorrect to say that pleasures cannot be condensed (I read "condensed" as "intensified").

I paraphrase the PD as "the three components of pleasures are intensity, duration and location. If every pleasure was the same in these three ways, all pleasures would be the same. Pleasures are not the same in these three ways, but in fact these three components are the most useful ways of analyzing pleasures." In fact, the translation in post #8 reads to me as being interpreted in this way (although far less verbose!)

PDs 10 & 11, to me, are similarly structured but not open to misinterpretation in the way that #9 is. They're listing things that are important to understand for Epicurus' ethics, but they're expressed as counterfactuals, which allows them each to be read in two ways.

I guess my primary quibble, then, is with separating "condensed", and saying that pleasures cannot be condensed. Other than that, the use of counterfactuals allows each of these three PDs to be read in two ways: 1) that the things listed are important to understand, and 2) that it's very unusual for the "ifs" to occur.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2023 at 5:38 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3404-practical-pleasure-pain-perspectives-how-different-is-99-pleasure-from-100-pleas/>

[Quote from Don](#)

If every pleasure were condensed and were present at the same time and in the whole of one's nature or its primary parts...

But every pleasure cannot be condensed.

I did not pick that out initially but I think Godfrey is right on that point. I would extend that sentence to say "But every pleasure cannot be condensed so much as to occupy the whole organism." A pleasure can be intensified, but not so much as to consume all our experience, at least for very long.

I gather that other than that sentence Don and Godfrey (and I) would be in agreement with what Don wrote.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2023 at 5:39 AM

Going further:

What would be the implications of holding that **all** nonpainful experiences in life are pleasureable? Here are my thoughts on some, and I am sure there are many more:

First, this perspective makes it much easier to be confident in identifying "Pleasure" as your goal. Since you are including every non-painful activity of life within pleasure, you are in no way limiting yourself to "sex, drugs and rock'n roll." You are not phased at all by the Highbrow / Blueblood argument that you are failing to include the "higher" things in life in your overall goal. If the higher things bring pleasure, you as an Epicurean want those "higher things" even more firmly than do other people, because you understand truly **why** you want them. You gain confidence that this is a true philosophy that really has merit, and you grow ever more immune to false philosophic and religious alternatives.

Another major implication is that there would be no drive toward asceticism or minimalism any more than an obsession with opulence and luxury. You would see your best life not as that which contained the least absolute amount of pain, but the life in which pleasure most predominates over pain. Given any particular set of real life pains, a larger amount of pleasure offsets those pains more than does a smaller amount of pleasure. The effort involved in writing a monumental poem that is likely to win you affection and friendship and preserve your favorite philosophy for the ages, or the effort of setting up a school to wage intellectual war against the world of existing priests and philosophers, fades into insignificance compared to the pleasure of

realizing what your hard work has accomplished.

A man who suffers from normal types of back pain would want to remedy it completely if he could, but not to the exclusion of all the other benefits of life. In many cases he does not have the ability to completely end the back pain short of suicide, and he knows that his best life involves much more than spending every waking moment pursuing a totally pain-free back. (Again, we're talking normal amounts of back pain.) Such a man would be better served by taking reasonable steps to alleviate his pain and then "drown out" the rest of his pain with experiences of pleasure, by adding activities which bring more pleasure than pain, than he would by reducing his total engagement with life to a mere minimum. This is because in relative terms the back pain is more likely to be offset by the pleasure of ten interactions with ten friends than the pleasure of one interaction with a single friend. While in this example we can use "friendship" as the activity because that is a pleasure that is easier to see as more heavily predominant in pleasure, in truth the individual circumstances will determine which activities involve the most benefit of pleasure (considering here duration, intensity, and location) at the least cost in pain. And in general, less engagement in life is going to result in the relative magnification of such pains as do exist than would more engagement in life. This increasing predominance of pleasure over pain would be true whatsoever activities you engage in so long as they bring more pleasure than pain.

And there is **no** disposition to read "engagement in life" as something that is painful. Rather the opposite is true - all experiences of life are pleasurable unless they involve some specific pain. It is not the norm of life's most important activities that they necessarily bring undue pain. Through the use of prudence you can normally live a pleasurable life that is full and complete while still keeping pain to a reasonable minimum.

Post by "Don" of October 6, 2023 at 8:36 AM

Recognizing all non-painful feelings as pleasure is exactly right.

From my (admittedly unoriginal) perspective, that was Epicurus's innovation that set him apart from the Cyrenaics. Cicero, on the other hand, seems to want to put Epicurus back into the same box as the Cyrenaics and argue against his strawman and not deal with the complexities that Torquatis puts forward.

I also look at the work in psychology that calls this positive and negative affect. You're either feeling positive or negative affect, there is no neutral state. If you're feeling neither positive or negative affect, you're dead... Literally, not figuratively btw.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2023 at 10:24 AM

Here's a passage that is frequently troublesome and is guaranteed to bring out the inner Stoic / Ascetic / Buddhist in anyone who does not consider all non-painful experiences to be pleasurable.

[Quote from Epicurus Letter to Menoecus \[128\]](#)

The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear. And when this is once secured for us, all the tempest of the soul is dispersed, since the living creature has not to wander as though in search of something that is missing, and to look for some other thing by which he can fulfill the good of the soul and the good of the body. *For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure."

I would say rather than a call to asceticism, the better interpretation of this passage is that once we have filled our experience with pleasures we have no further need for additional pleasures because all pain has been eliminated. That does not mean that we no longer have need for the pleasures which we accumulated in order to fill our experience, it simply means that we need no further additional pleasures beyond those which we already have.

Those who suggest that we have no need of pleasure after our life is full of pleasures are saying something similar to that we have no need of life after our life is full of life. That would be a perverse reading of the passage and writes the word "pleasure" completely out of Epicurean philosophy.

When you recognize all experience that is not painful is pleasurable, such an interpretation becomes impossible. Painlessness is then seen, not as a particular type of pleasure that replaces pleasure, but as a life full of pleasures from which pains have been eliminated. Painlessness then no longer swallows up the category of pleasure, but becomes simply the recognition that filling your experience up to 100% pleasure is all that is possible. And "disturbance" is simply one way of looking at the pains (or category of pains) that need to be minimized or eliminated in order to reach as close to 100% pleasure as you can. You can't reach the desired goal of 100% pleasure if you have mental disturbances that amount to pains.

Painlessness seen as 100% pleasure (the terms are interchangeable) becomes the objective at all times in the same way that the objective of straining the wine to remove impurities is to produce the best quality wine. At the end of the straining process we do not discard the wine, we experience it no matter how many fine impurities might be remaining. The purpose of the exercise is to experience the wine -- in no way are you straining the wine in order to discard it and then drink water!

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3404-practical-pleasure-pain-perspectives-how-different-is-99-pleasure-from-100-pleas/>