

Pleasure And Pain Modeled With Math

Post by “waterholic” of December 2, 2023 at 8:20 AM

This post may appear a bit Platonic or Aristotelian in nature, but please indulge me, there is no intention of arriving at a universal "magic" formula here. I was prompted by the long and confusing discussion originated by Cicero, who was incidentally the reason I started to read Epicurus. Someone as pompous and unappealing as Cicero going to such lengths to criticise seemingly sensible ideas? It was worth a read.

[Cassius, Joshua](#) and others as always did a remarkable job of going through Cicero's arguments and debunking them. Keeping the mental image of all the moving parts in these arguments, however, is a challenge. How do we reconcile the following statements:

- the state of no pain is the absolute pleasure
- pain and pleasure cannot be mixed
- even at rest and without intense stimuli we can feel pleasure
- weak pain can be endured, intense pain is not permanent (there is limit to absolute pain).

It has always been easier for me to express such ideas with formulae that are more precise than words. To be clear, these are not "natural laws" , but rather a helpful model to understand ideas for those who prefer communication in numbers.

To start with, any sensation is a source for pleasure and pain, let's denote these PL and -PN (PL, -PN). Assuming a theoretical unit of measurement, a scoop of icecream could be for instance (1, -0.1) - that is 1 unit of pleasure due to taste and -0.1 unit of pain in teeth. At any moment, we experience (or recall) many stimuli: we breath, watch, hear, all our senses work. Therefore, not experiencing pleasure (or pain) would be virtually impossible (back to Cicero!).

The question is, how are those pleasure and pain units converted to the overall sense of wellbeing? An example model would be this:

$$f = \arctan \left(\left| \frac{\text{pleasure}}{\text{pain}} \right| \right)$$

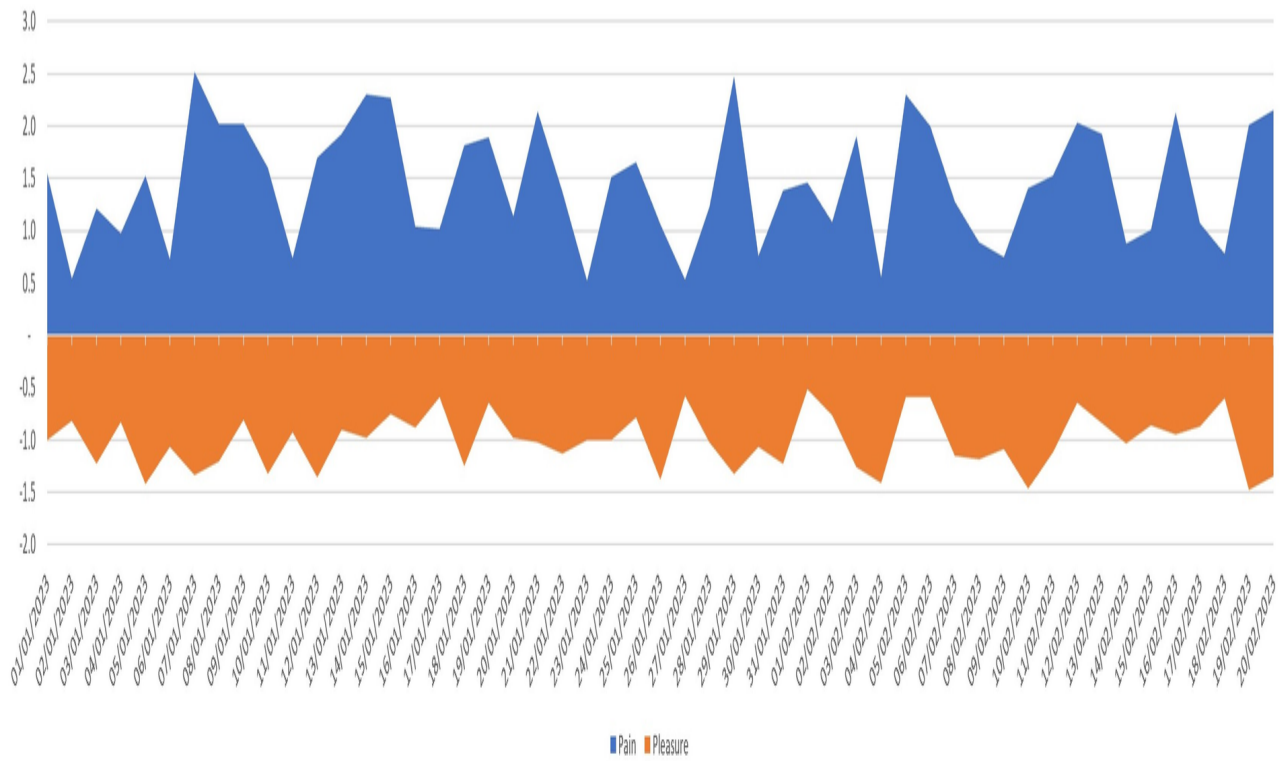
I have used this formula to incorporate the limits to our wellbeing: removing 100% of pain is impossible, but removing 99.99999% of pain will result in the maximum of pleasure irrespective of how much actual pleasure stimuli you receive at that moment. Here is how your wellbeing is mapped depending on pleasure and pain:

		Pain Stimuli											
		0.00 -	0.10 -	0.35 -	0.60 -	0.85 -	1.10 -	1,000.00 -	10,000.00 -	100,000.00 -	1,000,000.00 -	10,000,000.00 -	100,000,000.00 -
Pleasure stimuli	0.50	1.5708	1.3734	0.9601	0.6947	0.5317	0.4266	0.0005	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	0.75	1.5708	1.4382	1.1342	0.8961	0.7230	0.5984	0.0007	0.0001	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	1.50	1.5708	1.5042	1.3416	1.1903	1.0552	0.9380	0.0015	0.0001	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	1.75	1.5708	1.5137	1.3734	1.2405	1.1186	1.0096	0.0017	0.0002	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	2.50	1.5708	1.5308	1.4317	1.3353	1.2431	1.1563	0.0025	0.0002	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	2.75	1.5708	1.5344	1.4442	1.3560	1.2710	1.1903	0.0027	0.0003	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	3.50	1.5708	1.5422	1.4711	1.4010	1.3326	1.2663	0.0035	0.0003	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	3.75	1.5708	1.5441	1.4777	1.4121	1.3479	1.2855	0.0037	0.0004	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	4.50	1.5708	1.5486	1.4932	1.4382	1.3841	1.3311	0.0045	0.0004	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	4.75	1.5708	1.5497	1.4972	1.4451	1.3937	1.3432	0.0047	0.0005	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	5.00	1.5708	1.5508	1.5009	1.4514	1.4024	1.3542	0.0050	0.0005	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	5.25	1.5708	1.5518	1.5042	1.4570	1.4103	1.3643	0.0052	0.0005	0.0001	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	5.50	1.5708	1.5526	1.5072	1.4621	1.4175	1.3734	0.0055	0.0005	0.0001	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
	1,000.00	1.5708	1.5707	1.5704	1.5702	1.5699	1.5697	0.7854	0.0997	0.0100	0.0010	0.0001	0.0000
	10,000.00	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5707	1.5707	1.5707	1.4711	0.7854	0.0997	0.0100	0.0010	0.0001
	100,000.00	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5608	1.4711	0.7854	0.0997	0.0100	0.0010
	1,000,000.00	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5698	1.5608	1.4711	0.7854	0.0997	0.0100
	10,000,000.00	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5707	1.5698	1.5608	1.4711	0.7854	0.0997
100,000,000.00	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5707	1.5698	1.5608	1.4711	0.7854	
1,000,000,000.00	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5707	1.5698	1.5608	1.4711	
10,000,000,000.00	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5708	1.5707	1.5698	1.5608	

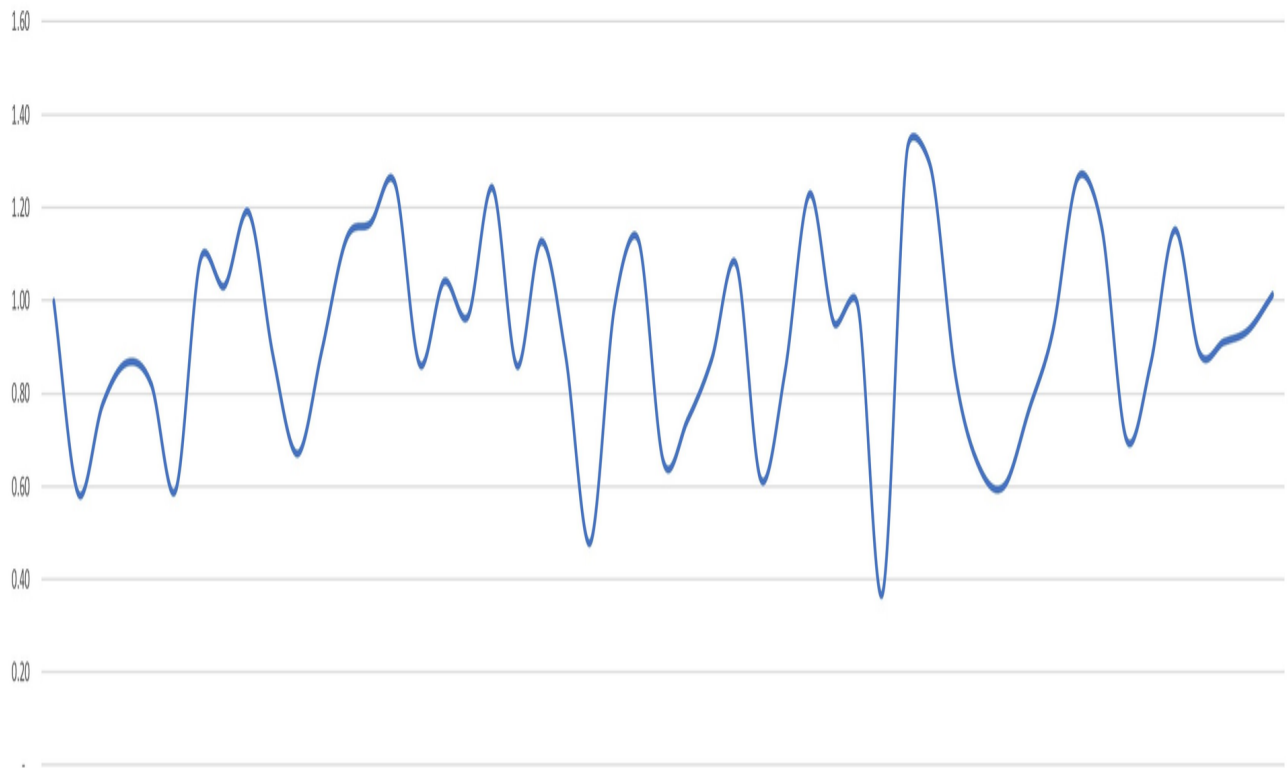
The middle white area is our daily life. When pain is brought down to the minimum (close to 0) we experience maximum pleasure, no matter how much pleasure stimuli we actually receive at that moment. Finally, extreme pain brings the wellbeing to 0, but that's the limit. Incidentally, in this example our maximum pleasure is defined by $\pi/2$ (yes, that Pi of Archimedes).

Here is how our daily life would look like in terms of pleasure/pain stimuli and our overall wellbeing:

Pain + Pleasure Stimuli over time



How we feel



Once again, this is just a model of the way I understand Epicurus for the moment. Any thoughts on whether I am missing something?

Post by “Don” of December 2, 2023 at 8:23 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

Someone as pompous and unappealing as Cicero going to such lengths to criticise seemingly sensible ideas? It was worth a read.



Post by “Cassius” of December 2, 2023 at 9:04 AM

Thank you for the time putting all that together!

[Quote from waterholic](#)

Once again, this is just a model of the way I understand Epicurus for the moment. Any thoughts on whether I am missing something?

I am going to have to take some time to absorb it all.

Perhaps labeling (at least on the main chart) the directions of greater pleasure / lesser pleasure and greater pain / lesser pain?

It probably should be obvious but not on first glance, at least to a non-mathematician like me.

Also, why does the numbering jump from 5.50 to 1000, and from 1.10 to 1000?

Also: Is there a narrative explanation of what the "arctan" function does? Why are the charts not simple arithmetic?

And last, on the "over time" chart, where do the input values come from per day. Presuming that you are just taking random numbers, could that be stated so as to make the chart more clear?

Post by “Cassius” of December 2, 2023 at 9:11 AM

Just for the sake of thought, not to disagree with your points:

1. the state of no pain is the absolute pleasure (or is it "the highest" pleasure? and should we add for completeness that the state of no pleasure is the highest pain?)
2. pain and pleasure cannot be mixed (I see no issues there, unless it helps to say that they can "coexist in separate parts of the experience, but not mix")
3. even at rest and without intense stimuli we can feel pleasure (given that pleasure is not defined as requiring stimuli at all, but as "agreeable feeling")
4. weak pain can be endured, intense pain is not permanent (there is limit to absolute pain). (to "the highest" pain?)

Post by “Cassius” of December 2, 2023 at 9:15 AM

As one more aside, I see that in some of our recent Cicero reading that the wording is "life accompanied by pleasure" and "life accompanied by pain" as the way the issue is being described. While the "life" part is probably something to be clearly presumed, I wonder if in our current state of world corruption that the "life" part needs to be added back in to take account of the fact that pleasure and pain do not occur except for the living. And would that also not make clear why we would sometime choose death rather than "*life accompanied by total pain.*"

I am not at all sure of that but one of the recent sections in Book 1 or 2 did seem to use (at least Reid translated it as) "life accompanied by" --- and that *might* be significant.

EDIT:

Book 2 ==

XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness

reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance. When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better? Imagine on the other hand a man worn by the greatest mental and bodily pains which can befall a human being, with no hope before him that his lot will ever be lighter, and moreover destitute of pleasure either actual or probable; what more pitiable object can be mentioned or imagined? But if a life replete with pains is above all things to be shunned, then assuredly the supreme evil is life accompanied by pain; and from this view it is a consistent inference that the climax of things good is life accompanied by pleasure.

Post by “waterholic” of December 2, 2023 at 9:36 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Perhaps labeling (at least on the main chart) the directions of greater pleasure / lesser pleasure and greater pain / lesser pain?

Indeed, thank you. I wasn't sure if anything like this would have any value in the first place, so did not spend too much time labeling.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Also, why does the numbering jump from 5.50 to 1000, and from 1.10 to 1000?

The values are of course arbitrary. The assumption here is that in our daily lives we experience pleasure and pain in the range of 0 to 3-4 of arbitrary units. But what happens to us when we experience extremes? Imagine a regular daily life interrupted by an extremely stimulating (negatively or positively experience). So the units here are given to demonstrate the extremes: the way "we feel" is calibrated to the environment. We can have a normal life in a modern city or all of a sudden be transported to a war zone. After a brief shock, we will continue to experience negative and positive stimuli in a similar range as before.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Also: Is there a narrative explanation of what the "arctan" function does? Why are the charts not simple arithmetic?

This brings us to why we can't use simple arithmetic. Simple linear arithmetic functions are proportional and infinite. Let's say we have a function How we feel = Function of (how much pleasure we get). If the function is simple arithmetic, then there will be no limit to how good we feel: no amount of sex, booz and rocknroll will be too much. No amount of tiramisu will be too unpleasant. The arctan function is a trigonometric function that happens to meet the required shape - some benefit in the beginning, but a maximum limit to how well we feel no matter how much stimuli is applied. There are other functions like that, but arctan (inverse tangent) is the most convenient one that came to my mind.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And last, on the "over time" chart, where do the input values come from per day. Presuming that you are just taking random numbers, could that be stated so as to make the chart more clear?

Yes absolutely, thank you. These are randomly generated numbers. To be clear, I don't believe such mathematics in practical life would be of any value or use - we are far better equipped to do the mental "maths" between pleasure and pain by default.

Post by "Cassius" of December 2, 2023 at 9:36 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

The middle white area is our daily life. When pain is brought down to the minimum (close to 0) we experience maximum pleasure, no matter how much pleasure stimuli we actually receive at that moment

Also: [Don](#) especially:

I wonder if the "stimuli we receive" phrasing (which is inherent in a lot of common discussion, and not just in this thread) is part of the problem. Is not Epicurus saying that the normal condition pleasures are not "stimuli" that are "received" at all, but self-generated through the minds appreciation of the true facts of life? The "received" part is especially a problem if that word implies that they just fall in your lap without effort, which I gather is pretty clear they do not (or at least they are not always seen to be pleasure without proper philosophy).

Post by "waterholic" of December 2, 2023 at 9:42 AM

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I have to think about this. The stimuli here refers to any stimulation of our brain. This is not about experiential pleasure vs. pleasure due to our memories, for instance. The brain is stimulated with experiences AND memories. I don't know anything about biology, but the assumption here is that any kind of "chemical" stimulation results in pleasure and pain reaction in the brain. If we stop experiencing those it means we no longer exist. At least this is my understanding of stimuli as I write.

Post by “waterholic” of December 2, 2023 at 9:47 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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weak pain can be endured, intense pain is not permanent (there is limit to absolute pain). (to "the highest" pain?)

Thank you [Cassius](#), this is very helpful.

Post by “Cassius” of December 2, 2023 at 9:47 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

To be clear, I don't believe such mathematics in practical life would be of any value or use - we are far better equipped to do the mental "maths" between pleasure and pain by default.

Yes I agree, but I DO think that plotting out some kind of graphical picture DOES help with a high-level understanding of the relationships between pain and pleasure, and so I think this is very worthwhile. There's simply too much muddying thinking out there to take anything for granted.

[Quote from waterholic](#)

I have to think about this. The stimuli here refers to any stimulation of our brain.

And I gather that Cicero's discussion is focusing on "stimulation of the senses." Does all awareness come through the senses? I'd say probably not, and maybe the precise issue they were debating is whether pleasure must be confined to actions of "the senses" or whether pleasure can be experienced (mentally) without the *present* stimulation of the senses. The relationship between "experience" and "sense" is pretty tricky and I am not sure how to best express it.

Post by “waterholic” of December 2, 2023 at 10:02 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I certainly can't claim that I have an answer here. But here is my intuition: aside from the argument of whether external stimulation is necessary to experience pleasure, there is the argument that external stimulation simply cannot be disregarded or turned off. Even with all possible senses damaged to a degree, a person still senses. Those senses trigger emotions, memories etc. Our brains are complex machines and they don't require much stimulation to

create an emotional response. Even a small amount of stimulation can get a great response. In the model I presented here, removing all the pain leaves only the tiniest amount of pleasure (say from the fact that one breaths) and that results in the state of maximum pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of December 2, 2023 at 10:04 AM

Aside - Waterholic is the thread name change ok?

Post by “waterholic” of December 2, 2023 at 10:06 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Aside - Waterholic is the thread name change ok?

Thank you, I think it's a lot more accurate. "Explaining" would be too ambitious 😊

Post by “Bryan” of December 2, 2023 at 12:08 PM

"This very thing is the good: Escaping from the bad -- because It is not possible for the good to be placed anywhere when neither what is painful nor what is distressing is any longer making way for it" (Plutarchi Non posse) 1091 A-B

If I were to chart my pleasure, it would most usually be at total pleasure with only occasional dips down due to uncommon circumstances (sickness, unexpected occurrences, etc).

The removal of pain, and the painlessness that results when pain is removed, is exactly what pleasure is.

I achieve full physical pleasure frequently and naturally by the internal process in my body when I have the necessary accommodations of food and shelter.

I achieve full mental pleasure just as naturally and frequently, by realizing the ease of obtaining physical contentment and fostering gratitude for my success in doing so.

In failing to appreciate this fact, the public (even when they are in a painless bodily state) tries to add to their pleasure by engaging in further activities (the things that produce pleasure of degenerates, τὰ Ποιητικὰ τῶν περὶ τοὺς ἀσώτους ἡδονῶν, KD10), which usually leads them to further pains and worries!

KD3 "The limit in the amount of pleasures is the removal of all pain."

KD4 "Pain does not last continuously in the body..."

Post by "Cassius" of December 4, 2023 at 9:38 PM

The questions involved in this thread came up tonight in our "First Monday / New Member" meeting. To some extent the question comes down to:

Is it useful at all -- is it possible at all - to think in terms of a "total experience" or "net experience" and then break down that experience into discrete pleasures and pains that fall one one side of the balance vs. the other side?

I think most of us agree that it is impossible "mathematically" or "in precise quantity" to "measure" individual pleasures and pains.

On the other hand, I think most of us would also admit that there is a sense in which we are continually doing exactly that: we are looking at situations and deciding what to choose and what to avoid based on what we expect to happen in terms of more pains or more pleasures.

So I post this to suggest that we have more work to do so that people on both sides of these issues can bridge the gap between what we do in real life (where we do weigh pleasures against pains) vs the limitations of a mathematical model.

How do we sufficiently explain the limits of such a model while also getting the benefits that should come in visualizing the practical choices we have to make in life?

Post by "Cassius" of December 4, 2023 at 9:41 PM

For those who don't remember past discussions, here is one of [my infamous worksheets](#):

Epicurean Net Pleasure Maximization Worksheet

"For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."

Feelings Of Pleasure (+)						Feelings of Pain (-)								
Life Activity	Total Pleasure Score					Net Score	Total Pain Score					Notes		
	Intensity / Extent of Pleasure	Current Bodily Pleasure	Future Mental Pleasure	Future Bodily Pleasure	Future Total Pleasure		Intensity / Extent of Pain	Current Bodily Pain	Future Mental Pain	Future Bodily Pain	Future Total Pain			
Sleep		6			4	10	10	0						
Go to Work				4	4	4	12	7	-5			-2	-3	
Have Lunch with Friends		6	5	7	2	20	20	0						
Go to Gym		4		1	1	5	11	3	-8	-4	-4			
Go to Museum		5		5	5	15	15	0						
Read Lucretius		8		8	8	24	23	-1	-1					
Read Plato						0	-21	-21	-7			-7	-7	
Choose Activities To Maximize The Pleasure Score ... >>						92	57	-35	<< ... At A Cost In Pain You Find To Be Acceptable					

Scoring Considerations:

- (1) Feelings cannot be captured in numerical terms. All scoring is relative. Nature provides no absolute standards and no authority higher than your own feelings.
- (2) The goal of life is to maximize under your personal circumstances the net pleasure score in the gold box.
- (3) The theoretical scoring limit is that which can be attained when a person's experience is completely filled with pleasures with no mixture of pain. This theoretical limit is not attainable for indefinite periods by human beings, but is considered "god-like" and serves as the goal toward which to strive.
- (4) Maximizing net pleasure is achieved by choosing activities which maximize pleasure at a cost in pain that you deem acceptable.
- (5) All pleasures are pleasing, but some pleasures exact a greater cost in pain than do others.
- (6) Sometimes we choose pain when a choice that is painful in the present brings us greater net pleasure or lesser net pain.
- (7) In predicting the cost in pain of any activity, remember that pleasures neither natural nor necessary will frequently (but not always) exact the greatest cost in pain; pleasures which are both natural and necessary will generally (but not always) exact the least cost in pain.
- (8) Remember to consider how your choices produce pain or pleasure in your friends, because this impacts your own scoring.
- (9) A net score of zero does not indicate that there are "neutral" states of feeling. Activities may produce both pleasurable and painful results, but feelings, like oil and water, do not mix to produce a third category beyond pleasure and pain.

Post by "Cassius" of December 4, 2023 at 9:41 PM

A prior effort at an equation:

Post

[RE: The Hedonistic Calculus - explained through an equation](#)

Charles --Very interesting! This is similar to a discussion we had in regard to coming up with a "pleasure maximization spreadsheet." [A Draft Epicurean Pleasure Maximization Worksheet](#)

One of the first problems that makes this hard is in regard to "intensity." What does "intensity" really mean, and how do we judge it in comparison with duration / time and the other factors as well?

Given this statement in the letter to Menoeceus it seems clear that Epicurus would not say that "time" can alone...



Cassius

November 4, 2019 at 10:43 AM

Post by "Cassius" of December 4, 2023 at 9:47 PM

I probably obscured the topics with my several posts there. Maybe the ultimate question is:

"Is it useful at all -- is it possible at all - to think in terms of a "total experience" or "net experience" and then break down that experience into discrete pleasures and pains that fall one one side of the balance vs. the other side?"

Is a "total experience" or a "net experience" just an intellectual abstraction and not something "real?"

Even if not "real," is it "useful?" Is it more misleading than useful? If so, is there a way to reduce the hazards so that it becomes useful? Or is it possible that there is just something so inherently inappropriate in the analysis that it can never be made useful?

Post by "Godfrey" of December 5, 2023 at 1:18 AM

Does anybody recall where the phrase "hedonic calculus" was first used? It seems to me that a later Epicurean (Philodemus?) used it, but I can't put my finger on it. I'm curious as to what the original Greek (?) words were and what exactly they might infer. IDK whether or not that would be pertinent here, but I just want to add it to the mix.

Post by "Godfrey" of December 5, 2023 at 1:34 AM

From [https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/algeb...dney%20stones.:](https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/algeb...dney%20stones.)

Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz are both credited with the invention of modern calculus in the 17th century.

In Latin, calculus means "pebble." Because the Romans used pebbles to do addition and subtraction on a counting board, the word became associated with computation. Calculus has also been borrowed into English as a medical term that refers to masses of hard matter in the body, such as kidney stones.

Judging by this, "calculus" wasn't even a word in Greek. So "hedonic calculus" would be a later overlay onto choices and rejections, which probably doesn't add any clarity to this thread. ☐

Post by "Godfrey" of December 5, 2023 at 3:21 AM

Another possible model for pleasure and pain is the act of making a painting. There are continuous judgements being made as to the various colors to use, and how to use them. What are the varying intensities of each of the colors? What are their locations? As your eyes travel over a painting, what is the duration of each particular color? (That might be a little abstract; how pervasive is the color?)

These also apply to the forms or shapes in the painting, to spatial relationships, to subject matter and to multivalence of interpretations of the painting.

A model such as this is valuable partly because it demonstrates the complexity of choices and rejections, as well as their intuitive nature. For me, attempting to accomplish a model like this through mathematics introduces a degree of removal from and abstraction of the process of living which conflicts with the nature of the Epicurean Canon: something that would delight a pompous aristocrat like Cicero. 😊

Post by “Don” of December 5, 2023 at 6:05 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Judging by this, "calculus" wasn't even a word in Greek. So "hedonic calculus" would be a later overlay onto choices and rejections, which probably doesn't add any clarity to this thread. ☐☐

Jeremy Bentham came up with the idea of the "felicific calculus" although he didn't use that exact phrase in his [An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation](#) (1789). If you want to see someone apply mathematics to pleasure and pain, that book is a tour de force!

The words Epicurus used translate to things like decide, judge, etc. Section 129 of Menoikeus is probably the most succinct exposition. Here's my paraphrase/translation:

[129] *Because we perceived pleasure as a fundamental good and common to our nature, and so, as a result of this, we begin every choice and rejection against this, judging every good thing by the standard of how that pleasure affects us (i.e., how we react to considering experiencing that pleasure). And because pleasure is the fundamental and inborn good, this is why not every pleasure is seized and we pass by many pleasures when greater unpleasant things were to result for us as a result: and we think many pains better than pleasures whenever greater pleasure were to follow for a longer time by patiently abiding the pain.*

κρίνοντες “judging, deciding + (accusative” πᾶν ἀγαθὸν “every good thing,” i.e., “every pleasure” against or by the κανόνι τῷ πάθει “the standard of how we react to what happens to us when we experience - or consider experiencing - that specific good thing.

“And against this (that pleasure is a fundamental good and common to our nature), judging every good thing (i.e., every possible pleasurable experience) by the standard of how that pleasure affects us or how we react to considering experiencing that pleasure.”

By the way, I'm translating πάθει (pathei) in its literal sense as "that which is experienced."

See also:

DL 10.34 (Diogenes' commentary)

They affirm that there are two states of feeling, pleasure and pain, which arise in every animate being, and that the one is favourable and the other hostile to that being, and by their means choice and avoidance are determined

κρίνεσθαι < κρίνω "judge, decide"

So, it seems to me we're more of a judge than a mathematician.

Post by “waterholic” of December 5, 2023 at 7:42 AM

Quote from Cassius

How do we sufficiently explain the limits of such a model while also getting the benefits that should come in visualizing the practical choices we have to make in life?

I would approach this from two perspectives:

1. Math is a more precise language. Anyone versed in rudimentary math can fully understand the 2-3 formulae i have used to express a "model" of the pleasure - pain dynamic. There are no ambiguities. In this sense, it is useful as a very precise communication language, provided we are explicit about the limitations of the model. A BIG limitation is the measurement units of pleasure and pain: there are no established units and there probably won't ever be. The second limitation is the fact that the pleasure/pain response from any experience can vary from minute to minute.

These limitations render the model completely useless in practice, except:

2. I believe there could still be practical benefit from going through one's choices regularly and questioning from this perspective whether the trade-off holds. Applying some sort of rule-based standard will create a structure and force the person to face the truth. This is still work in progress for me.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 5, 2023 at 10:30 AM

Quote from waterholic

Applying some sort of rule-based standard will create a structure and force the person to face the truth.

This sounds to me to be at odds with a philosophy based on individual responsibility. Isn't the point that, in a purely material universe, there is no rule-based standard?

However the fact that there is no rule-based standard leaves open the possibility that one can create a rule-based standard for oneself, as long as they don't assume that it will necessarily apply to anyone else. That's part of the beauty of the world we live in!

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2023 at 12:03 PM

I don't know that I would consider it a "rules based standard," but I think we have to all face the question and answer for ourselves whether different types of pleasure are in fact interchangeable, or whether they differ in at least intensity, duration, and location.

And are those three considerations the **only** distinctions? I think probably not.

What I see us discussing here is that while all pleasures are not reducible to atomic "pleasure units," it is still essential to confront and answer for ourselves whether our rankings of them are totally subjective whims of the moment, or whether they are linked to repeatable and regular bodily or mental phenomena that can usefully be described in repeatable observations, or what.

I do think that it is useful exercise to at least in our individual capacities examine how we want to answer those questions.

My bright line is drawn that I think it's totally inappropriate to take "my" measurements of relative values of pleasure, and presume that my own measurements apply to other people, or that there's any natural design to "maximize pleasure units for all" -- that kind of thing. "The greatest good for the greatest number" has always seemed to me to be a prescription for total monotheism / authoritarianism.

But short of that, I think the exercise we're engaging in is useful, at the very least in that it emphasizes this bright line where I gather that (apparently) the Benthamite utilitarians went far afield.

Post by “waterholic” of December 5, 2023 at 1:10 PM

| [Quote from Godfrey](#)

This sounds to me to be at odds with a philosophy based on individual responsibility. Isn't the point that, in a purely material universe, there is no rule-based standard?

Let me clarify "rules-based standard". I think of it as a useful habit. For instance, if I spend 30 days measuring my calorific intake and making small adjustments, the result can be a much healthier lifestyle. The measurement can stop after a month - the habit takes over. Similarly, if I decide to list all the decisions I made during the week and evaluate them from the pleasure-pain perspective, I am sure this could train habits that would create a more enjoyable life. But the assessment of pleasure and pain remains subjective and changes over time - there can be no rules there.

Post by "Godfrey" of December 5, 2023 at 3:30 PM

Thanks for that clarification @waterholic ! This makes perfect sense; I interpreted rules based standard quite differently so now I understand what you're getting at.

Post by "Martin" of December 11, 2023 at 7:27 PM

Quote

Does anybody recall where the phrase "hedonic calculus" was first used?

It seems Plato was the first to present the hedonic calculus (in "Protagoras"), apparently as a strawman to beat down hedonism:

[\(PDF\) Pleasure in Plato's Protagoras and what Aristotle and Epicurus think about it \(Hebrew\) | Itai Greif - Academia.edu](#)