

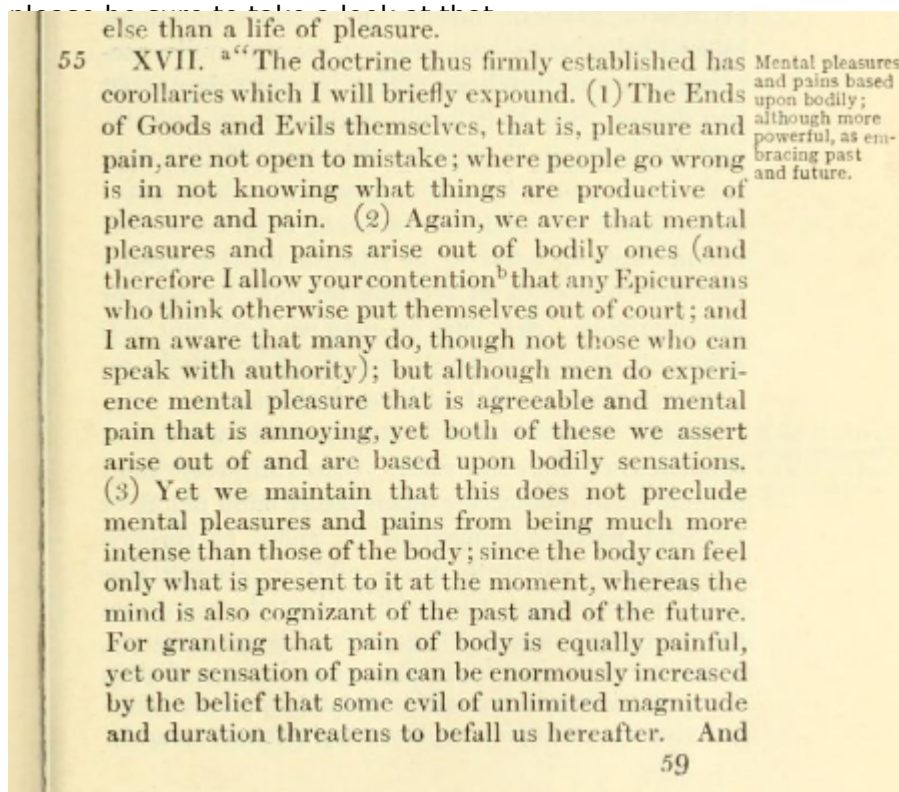
Mental pleasure/pain more intense and longer lasting than physical pleasure/pain

Post by "frank1syl" of December 5, 2023 at 11:15 AM

I would like to find quotes from Epicurus or other Epicureans which state that mental pleasure and pains are greater or last longer than physical pleasures and pains. Thanks!

Post by "Cassius" of December 5, 2023 at 11:56 AM

Frank -- Thanks for joining us here on the forum. I just posted a "Welcome" message to you --

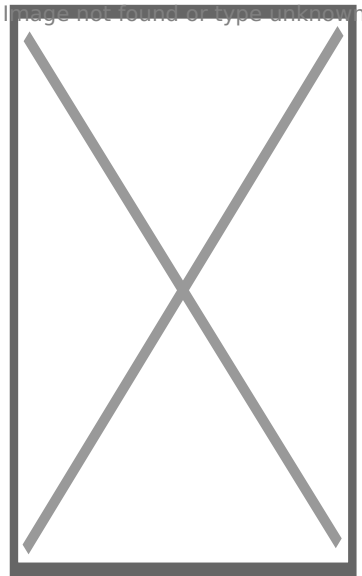


to mind on this topic is the n XVII -- see item (3) below

the same consideration may be transferred to pleasure: a pleasure is greater if not accompanied by any apprehension of evil. This therefore clearly appears, that intense mental pleasure or distress contributes more to our happiness or misery than a bodily pleasure or pain of equal duration. (4) But we do not agree that when pleasure is withdrawn uneasiness at once ensues, unless the pleasure happens to have been replaced by a pain: while on the other hand one is glad to lose a pain even though no active sensation of pleasure comes in its place: a fact that serves to show how great a pleasure is the mere absence of pain. (5) But just as we are elated by the anticipation of good things, so we are delighted by their recollection. Fools are tormented by the memory of former evils; wise men have the delight of renewing in grateful remembrance the blessings of the past. We have the power both to obliterate our misfortunes in an almost perpetual forgetfulness and to summon up pleasant and agreeable memories of our successes. But when we fix our mental vision closely on the events of the past, then sorrow or gladness ensues according as these were evil or good.

XVIII. "Here is indeed a royal road to happiness —open, simple, and direct! For clearly man can

A life of
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a life of



[De finibus bonorum et malorum : Cicero, Marcus Tullius : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Latin and English on opposite pages
archive.org

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 10, 2023 at 4:20 PM

Should the topic of pain be of interest I can talk about the biology and psychology of pain at great length. And yes, "existential" (psychosocially driven emotive pain) is more vexing and more long lasting than nociceptive (physical structure) pain. It is a major player in many forms of "chronic pain".

Post by “Cassius” of December 10, 2023 at 5:36 PM

This is **definitely** a question of great interest. Many people come to Epicurean philosophy thinking he is focused on "bodily" pain, and it's a surprise to find that he puts equal or really greater stock in the mental side.

I file sure anything you'd offer on pain would be of great interest here so thanks for offering!!

Post by “Godfrey” of December 10, 2023 at 6:00 PM

I second that! 👍

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 10, 2023 at 6:35 PM

Okay, I'm happy to contribute. And, we could come at the topic (collectively) from a variety of vantage points. I would be happy if this was a discussion, not a didactic. In that spirit, let me throw out a couple of frameworks that I think are helpful to get the big picture of pain as a human experience. Then we can see where the discussion takes us from there.

For me, to really understand pain it is pivotal to understand evolution. Pain essentially says two things from an evolutionary perspective: 1) this is a problem, and 2) this is concerning. The former reports function and structure issues and is summarized in neurobiology as nociception. The latter reports existential risks and is summarized in the neurobiology of suffering and

anguish. Pain biology always contains both elements, though the proportions can be greatly different and have greatly different courses over time. Evolution clearly understood that structural dysfunction presented risks, both physical and existential.

A great starting point to understand the dynamic interplay of these two issues is a simple, non-serious childhood injury. We've all see a child do something like fall down or fall (non-seriously) from a bicycle, get up screaming, run to a parent, and lapse in to further screams and crying. From the reaction one would anticipate that important injury had occurred. However, the parent nurtures the child, checks wounds and finds them minor, reassures and comforts the child, and in a few minutes the child is out playing with friends again. Examination of this scenario reveals that injury sets off both nociception and suffering/anguish. But, when risk and seriousness are removed from the equation the anguish goes away and the nociception quickly becomes a modest issue.

So, that takes me to the Lucretius quote, "“But when the mind is excited by some more vehement apprehension, we see the whole soul feel in unison through all the limbs, sweats and paleness spreadover the whole body, the tongue falter, the voice die away, a mist cover the eyes, the ears ring, the limbs sink under one; in short we often see men drop down from terror of mind; so that anybody may easily perceive from this that the soul is closely united with the mind, and, when it has been smitten by the influence of the mind, forthwith pushes and strikes the body.”

And, indeed, it strikes the body - in this context - with pain behaviors and exacerbation of nociceptive pain. Adult behaviors are outgrowths of these early presentations. When stress, fear, and vulnerability are high pain tends to be high. A great deal of the discussion of "chronic pain" is actually a discussion of chronic anguish. Opioids (pain pills) relieve both nociceptive pain and emotive pain. The reason is that they are interlinked in evolutionary neurobiology. The "opioid pain crisis" of the 1990's and before was really a discussion of opioids used for existential pain (they work, and then lead to addiction).

Okay, that's enough for the moment. So, let's see what portion of this strikes interest and we can go from there.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 11, 2023 at 1:14 AM

Fascinating! It's interesting (and reassuring) how closely our experience follows the biology. We've occasionally discussed, mostly anecdotally, the difference between "pain" and "suffering". For example if I have an injury I may eventually notice that I'm avoiding doing certain things, even though doing them doesn't actually hurt. Or I'll anticipate an action being

painful and tense up, thereby making it more painful than it would be otherwise. I'm thinking here of the injury as being "pain" and the avoiding or anticipating as being or causing "suffering".

How do desires fit into this evolutionary picture of pains, or do they? Are desires, biologically, considered pains or are they completely different? Philosophically, they seem to be a type of pain and yet, at the same time, they seem to be something quite different.

Also, is a complete absence of pain something that is considered neurologically possible while maintaining full consciousness?

My thinking is that, eventually, it would be most interesting to get an outline of how pleasure, pain and desire operate, together and separately, then perhaps dig into details from that point. But in my ignorance I might be overly ambitious about such a complex subject....

Post by “Don” of December 11, 2023 at 7:27 AM

[BrainToBeing](#) , that's a great post! Thanks for sharing your expertise and insights. Dr. Anna Lembke (author of *Dopamine Nation*) touched on some of the same themes. I like the way you described the relation but difference between nociception and suffering. How would you describe the pain from "painful" memories or similar mental pains? There's no actual nociception going on there, is there? I'm curious for you to expand on the "existential pain" you mentioned in passing.

Post by “frank1syl” of December 11, 2023 at 10:35 AM

The reason I had asked the question about the written source of the Epicurean belief that mental pain is worse or longer lasting than physical pain is that I was thinking about how this has a connection to the Stoic principle that "some things are in our power while others are not". The Stoics believe that the things in our power are the things that come from us (our attitudes, beliefs, judgments, desires, aversions, intentions, motives, will to act). In other words, the things in our power are mental abilities and capacities. I believe this is true, although I'm not a Stoic. I believe that Epicureanism has it right when it says that mental pain is worse than physical pain. But, taking my cue from the Stoics, the way to lessen mental pain is to realize that this is an area in which we have considerable power, and to focus on our mental capacities and abilities, rather than external events or circumstances, is the best way to approach mental

pain. This is often the opposite of how we try to lessen mental pain, which is to try to change our circumstances -- go on a cruise, buy a new car, redecorate our homes, take a pill, increase our aim for what is neither natural nor necessary, etc.

Post by “Cassius” of December 11, 2023 at 11:33 AM

[Quote from frank1syl](#)

In other words, the things in our power are mental abilities and capacities.

While I would agree with that generally there's also a limit to that: Diogenes Laertius X-117: "But before considering it let us explain what he and his followers think about the wise man. ... He will be more deeply moved by feelings, but this will not prove an obstacle to wisdom. A man cannot become wise with every kind of physical constitution, nor in every nation."

[Quote from frank1syl](#)

But, taking my cue from the Stoics, the way to lessen mental pain is to realize that this is an area in which we have considerable power, and to focus on our mental capacities and abilities, rather than external events or circumstances, is the best way to approach mental pain

I'd agree that certainly the way to deal with mental pain is to focus on the cause of the mental pain and to work as hard as possible to fix the conditions that led to it. The problems with the Stoics is that they seem to focus on simply by force of will convincing yourself that the pain is not significant, or is a matter of indifference, and that approach can conflict with working to change the condition that caused it. In the case of two of the most significant pains of life, fear of the gods and fear of death, Stoic physics is an absolute barrier to arriving at what Epicureans consider the truth to be -- that neither are a cause for fear or concern in the first place.

What this reminds me of is the constant interplay between Stoics and Epicureans as to virtue. Epicureans do not deprecate the virtues, such as prudence and wisdom and all the rest. Epicureans simply see the virtues as tools to an end and not an end in themselves.

In the example your giving about focusing on what is within control vs outside control I see the same issue. Yes it's obvious to everyone that some external events are beyond our control, but it should be equally obvious that some ARE within our control, and the first step of proper action would be to make that distinction and act on the ones that can be acted on, not fixate on the fact that those within our total control (our minds) are all that is important.

As in many of these comparisons you can seem to end up in a similar place at time, but the Stoic worldview if followed consistently would never get you to a pleasurable life, because no matter how the modern stoics work to water it down, true Stoicism holds pleasure in contempt and values nothing but "virtue" as the proper end.

I think a lot of people tend to look for the commonalities and then stop because they don't want to go further, as they sense the ultimate issue. Just like we're discussing in the podcast right now, the question of pleasure vs virtue underlies everything else:

[Quote from Cicero in On Ends Book 2](#)

So setting aside the systems of ail the rest, there remains a contest not between me and Torquatus, but between virtue and pleasure: a contest of which Chrysippus, a man both shrewd and careful, does not think lightly, for he considers that the entire decision about the supreme good is involved in the opposition between these things.

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 11, 2023 at 1:05 PM

Wow, you people are a delight! So many great ideas, and things that might be said about them. For my part, I hardly know where to start or what to respond to. I'll stay with the medical, neurobiological issues since that is where I might be of most benefit.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

For example if I have an injury I may eventually notice that I'm avoiding doing certain things, even though doing them doesn't actually hurt. Or I'll anticipate an action being painful and tense up, thereby making it more painful than it would be otherwise. I'm thinking here of the injury as being "pain" and the avoiding or anticipating as being or causing "suffering".

Reacting to past injury in this way might be considered "suffering"; however, I would put it in the category of adaptive strategy. Indeed, in most cases we do have caution or avoid places and circumstances where we have previously suffered injury. The aphorism "once burned, twice shy" comes to mind.

In contrast, "suffering" is more tightly related to living with or reliving the anguish of a prior situation. For example, with the death of a parent we all would feel loss and some suffering.

However, some people who saw themselves as highly dependent on the parent might have this suffering go on for years.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

How do desires fit into this evolutionary picture of pains, or do they? Are desires, biologically, considered pains or are they completely different? Philosophically, they seem to be a type of pain and yet, at the same time, they seem to be something quite different.

In my view desires are not equivalent to pain (existential or nociceptive). However, our desires, and particularly the loss of them as lost dreams, do produce existential anguish. And, because losses produce existential anguish they may compound nociceptive pain - making it much worse and lasting much longer. Also desires in the form of "that shouldn't have happened" cause existential anguish and do the same thing - propagating and exacerbating our perception of pain. So, sociological loss and psychological loss, particularly where compounded by expectations of "shouldn't have" and anger, markedly exacerbate nociceptive pain, lead to pain treatment failures, and extend pain symptoms into years or longer where the nociceptive injury might largely recover within weeks or a few months.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Also, is a complete absence of pain something that is considered neurologically possible while maintaining full consciousness?

No. There is a rare, serious condition called "Congenital Insensitivity to Pain". (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3564101/>)

This leads to tissue destruction and early death. So, such a condition is not impossible.

On the other hand, with less drama, there are many people who don't pay much attention to pain. For example, extreme sports enthusiasts (example: dirt bike riders) may be injured seriously many times and yet they quickly get over it and don't pay much attention to residual pains. This is an interesting subject (too long for this entry).

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

My thinking is that, eventually, it would be most interesting to get an outline of how pleasure, pain and desire operate, together and separately, then perhaps dig into details from that point. But in my ignorance I might be overly ambitious about such a complex subject....

It would easily support a whole book. The problem is that the complexity and some of the answers would not be appealing to a large audience.

[Quote from Don](#)

How would you describe the pain from "painful" memories or similar mental pains? There's no actual nociception going on there, is there? I'm curious for you to expand on the "existential pain" you mentioned in passing.

Because of the biological cross-connection of nociception and suffering we tend to use the word "pain" to cover both. So, as you said, we may refer to "painful" memories involving losses or abuses that did not actually involve any nociceptive pain. So, this is an interesting philosophical area which explores how types of experiences generate our vocabulary, and how this vocabulary may be subsequently extended to uses that involve some element of the original type of experience, while actually not correlating with it entirely. (Essentially, the vocabulary of metaphorical, experiential Venn/Euler diagrams.)

"Existential pain" may then be understood as a type of suffering that derives from adversity of various types. Two paths lead to "existential pain" as a term: 1) When we talk about loss we want it to be understood as important, interfering, and anguish-producing; so, we use "pain" vocabulary to transmit these ideas; 2) people suffering a lot of existential pain are considerably more prone to experience nociceptive pain even when the nociceptor is minor and transient.

Okay, this is probably way more in this entry that you would wish to see. So, I will stop. Hope the above helps and answers some questions (though perhaps generating others).

Best to all you smart folks!

Post by "BrainToBeing" of December 11, 2023 at 4:51 PM

By the way, I'm listening to Dr. Glidden on Prolepsis in a podcast on this site. He talks about "living in the present moment and living without fear". Indeed, these are critical to stress and pain management. A great deal of stress is derived from "living in the past" (worry or anger about past events) or "living in the future" (again, worry or fear about imagined future events). Living in the present moment emphasizes seeing what is, rather than what was or might be. And generally the real "now" is not as stress provoking as the other periods. (Of course, there is acute injury or acute loss, but "acute" doesn't last very long.) So, living in the now is a path to reduce the biology that generates pain - nociceptive or existential.

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 11, 2023 at 7:13 PM

[Quote from frank1syl](#)

I believe that Epicureanism has it right when it says that mental pain is worse than physical pain.

Based on how people consume opioids when they report pain I believe you are right. Addiction as a response to structural pain is rare. The reason for this is that addiction produces dysfunction whereas people with serious structural pain are focused on improving function. Conversely, where chronic pain is primarily psychosocial and existential then addiction to drugs is rather common (because drugs are "mind altering" and "take away" the anguish.)

[Quote from frank1syl](#)

But, taking my cue from the Stoics, the way to lessen mental pain is to realize that this is an area in which we have considerable power, and to focus on our mental capacities and abilities, rather than external events or circumstances, is the best way to approach mental pain. This is often the opposite of how we try to lessen mental pain, which is to try to change our circumstances -- go on a cruise, buy a new car, redecorate our homes, take a pill, increase our aim for what is neither natural nor necessary, etc.

The mechanisms of "mental pain" are complex, and commonly tragic when the issues are severe. We need to remember, of course, that mental pain can come in greatly different levels. If you screwed up the answer on question number 26 of yesterday's gardening test you might feel some mental pain, but a vacation would probably be good. Alternatively, if chronic mental pain is the result of childhood abuse then all of those efforts to "buy the way out of the pain" typically don't work. In my practice I saw many people who felt worse after coming back from an expensive vacation. They learned that they can feel better (and typically the pain was better, or even gone, during the vacation) but then they come back to "reality" and sink into deeper anguish.

Post by “frank1syl” of December 12, 2023 at 9:57 AM

There is so much going on in this thread I can scarce take it in. I had never heard the world "nociceptive" but it's a good one to keep in mind.

The idea of things under our control and things not under our control reminds me of something that Epicurus (I believe it was he who said it) about some things come about deterministically, some by chance, and some by our own choice or will. If anyone knows the 'address' of that saying I'd appreciate it.

I understand things coming to us which are outside our control, and our having control of what we choose and the direction of our will, but can't think of any example of things coming by chance, unless he's referring to "the swerve".

Post by “Cassius” of December 12, 2023 at 11:20 AM

Yes that's the letter to Menoecus:

[133] For indeed who, think you, is a better man than he who holds reverent opinions concerning the gods, and is at all times free from fear of death, and has reasoned out the end ordained by nature? He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain; he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame.

[134] For, indeed, it were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers: for the former suggests a hope of placating the gods by worship, whereas the latter involves a necessity which knows no placation. As to chance, he does not regard it as a god as most men do (for in a god's acts there is no disorder), nor as an uncertain cause (of all things) for he does not believe that good and evil are given by chance to man for the framing of a blessed life, but that opportunities for great good and great evil are afforded by it.

[135] He believes that the misfortune of the wise is better than the prosperity of the fool. It is better, in short, that what is well judged in action should not owe its successful issue to the aid of chance. [\[1\]](#)

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 12, 2023 at 1:53 PM

Of course, there can be no doubt that some things happen by happenstance or circumstance, and some as the result of choice. When you descend into the neurobiology of "will" it becomes even more complicated. So, on the topic of pain - particularly existential pain - we come to Epictetus: "It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters." In theory, our reactions are "under our control". However, even there potentials of neurobiology are the confounder.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It is better, in short, that what is well judged in action should not owe its successful issue to the aid of chance. [1]

Yet, chance ultimately cannot be avoided, since it permeates down to the last atom. This is why judgement is often illusory - a foible of reason, a critic of authority.

Post by "frank1syl" of December 12, 2023 at 2:16 PM

My main interest is practical. If mental pain is greater (impacts us more) than physical pain, then my focus ought to be on things entirely under my control (my free will), and secondarily, things I have some partial control over (chance?), and lastly, should not concern myself with things I can't control (destiny).

Post by "Cassius" of December 12, 2023 at 5:02 PM

Sounds reasonable as a general priority, but I would question whether it is really that easy to segment things. Death as an example of things that cannot be changed in the long run can still be affected by planning for the time and manner you encounter it. So even as to things beyond your control you still plan for them (for example life insurance is sometimes appropriate).

I wonder whether it's not more practical to line things up in order of significance in terms of pain and pleasure, and then to deal with them in that order (considering whether they can be changed or not as part of the analysis)?

Post by “TauPhi” of December 12, 2023 at 11:04 PM

[Quote from frank1syl](#)

My main interest is practical. If mental pain is greater (impacts us more) than physical pain,

To make this statement true, we would need to discover a way to measure both types of pain. 'Greater' might not be fortunate adjective here. 'Different' would probably be better. Also, mental pains can lead to physical pains and vice versa.

[Quote from frank1syl](#)

then my focus ought to be on things entirely under my control (my free will), and secondarily, things I have some partial control over (chance?), and lastly, should not concern myself with things I can't control (destiny).

What you think you have in your control can easily stop being in your control. From practical point of view, Stoic dichotomy of control doesn't seem to be applicable to humans. It would be perfect for us if we were purely reasonable creatures. We're not. We're creatures that mostly feel and sometimes reason so having pleasure and pain as guidelines seems to be a better approach in life.

To illustrate my points, I'll give you a short story of Pious Peter that I created for this occasion. The story won't guarantee me next Nobel Prize in literature but I hope it can show you that one type of pain can lead to another and stuff in our heads is not so easily controllable if our reasoning is flawed (and it is way more often than we wish it was).

Pious Peter worries greatly that a god will not accept him in heaven (mental pain). This makes Peter stressed so he can't sleep well anymore (physical pain). He's constantly tired (physical pain). His ability to perform at work decreases exponentially (mental). He gets fired (mental). He worries even more (mental). He can't eat properly now (physical). His body is weaker and weaker (physical). His mind takes him to darker and darker places (mental). Pious Peter can't control what's supposed to be in his control anymore (mental). He reaches for alcohol and pills (mental and physical) and his downward spiral continues.

I'll stop here or the story gets too drastic but I hope you get my point.

Instead of thinking in fixed categories of greater/lesser; mental/physical; controllable/uncontrollable, in my opinion, it's much more beneficial to try to learn as much as possible about the nature of ourselves and our surroundings and figure out how to wisely

pursue pleasures and avoid pains so we can feel that the overall balance is positive. This way we can enjoy our little game of life and, when times comes, leave the stage smiling.

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 13, 2023 at 9:09 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

figure out how to wisely pursue pleasures and avoid pains so we can feel that the overall balance is positive

So, in summary, is this then the core issue of the Epicurean? If so, i guess I'm not an Epicurean. I'm more interested in doing something constructive as my core driver. I deny pleasure where pursuing it would not be constructive (e.g. coffee and a glass of wine at dinner are my only drugs). I voluntarily accept pain where it comes necessarily as a consequence of doing something constructive (e.g. vigorous exercise entails some pain). And, I volunteer for existential pain when I struggle to understand things knowing that it will separate me from the interests of, and connection to, the average human. But, maybe that's just me. Certainly the last of these pertains clearly to the members of this erudite community.

Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2023 at 9:21 AM

Braintobeing - I am driving so this is brief but others can expand. Epicurus advised exactly what you are doing. The issue is the definition of pleasure, and Epicurus used a much more sweeping definition of pleasure than just immediate sensory stimulation. Your longer term goals are just as much under pleasure (because you find them desirable) than immediate satisfaction.

I also want to spend more time on what Tau Phi is saying but I suspect I differ with (or would say differently) what I am reading as "more or less" pleasure and pain. I think the weighing of relative pleasures and pains is essential to Epicurus. That's what allows us to agree that putting aside short term pleasures, or even accepting pains, is worthwhile in terms of the ultimate greater pleasure and lesser pain.

But the big issue here is the definition of pleasure, and Epicurus says life is desirable and that if the experience of life that we are talking about is not a pain, then whatever the experience is and no matter how removed it may be from immediate bodily sensory stimulation, it still

deserves to be called pleasure.

This is readily observable in reading Cicero's on ends. What Cicero objected to is that everyone calls agreeable immediate bodily stimulation "pleasure," but Epicurus innovated and extended the word pleasure to all non-painful experiences of life.

That extension is what Cicero objected to but it is how the ancients were reading Epicurus when he wrote [PD03](#) and "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain."

Post by "TauPhi" of December 13, 2023 at 11:35 AM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

So, in summary, is this then the core issue of the Epicurean? If so, I guess I'm not an Epicurean.

Firstly, there's much more to Epicurean philosophy than that. Secondly, study existing texts before deciding if you see yourself as an Epicurean or not. I'm just one of many Internet people and nothing I say is in any way authoritative. Please keep in mind I'm not strictly an Epicurean myself. I'm here as this philosophy is close to my heart and I find exchanging ideas with people gathered in this community very beneficial. Lastly, by wise pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain I don't mean to get as much sex, drugs and rock'n'roll as possible. I mean life choices that make my life worth living for myself.

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I deny pleasure where pursuing it would not be constructive (e.g. coffee and a glass of wine at dinner are my only drugs).

Can I ask why you chose to deny yourself such pleasures? Watching sunsets, staring at bonfires, listening to music and many other pleasures are not constructive and yet I don't know anyone who would willingly deny themselves such activities. And please don't take it as a personal attack. I'm genuinely curious as I have a feeling I might be misunderstanding what you're saying.

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I voluntarily accept pain where it comes necessarily as a consequence of doing something constructive (e.g. vigorous exercise entails some pain).

I absolutely agree with this. I'm starting to suspect what you call 'something constructive' I call 'pleasure' and we might be on the same page of the same book just written in different language.

Anyway, welcome to the forum [BrainToBeing](#) and thank you for your contribution so far. I find it very interesting.

Post by “Don” of December 13, 2023 at 1:34 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I'm more interested in doing something constructive as my core driver.

And "doing something constructive" gives you pleasure, right?

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I deny pleasure where pursuing it would not be constructive (e.g. coffee and a glass of wine at dinner are my only drugs). I voluntarily accept pain where it comes necessarily as a consequence of doing something constructive (e.g. vigorous exercise entails some pain).

"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." -Epicurus, letter to Menoikeus

I don't know. You might be an Epicurean after all. 😊

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 13, 2023 at 2:41 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Can I ask why you chose to deny yourself such pleasures?

I think constantly in terms of "we" rather than "me". And, in the consideration of "we" I need to ask who would pay the price if I think only of me. So, for example, when practicing medicine I very clearly knew the agenda was to do what was appropriate for the patient, and not just beneficial to my pleasure. I could have made a great deal more money and lived a much simpler life if I approached medicine for my "pleasure". And, yes, I realize that "down in the weeds" of "pleasure" is the idea that self-sacrifice may be interpreted as personal "pleasure". However, I can certainly tell you that doing what was right, rather than what was pleasurable, was not pleasure in many, many situations (long story with many elements).

[Quote from Don](#)

You might be an Epicurean after all. 😊

Maybe. I'm not the Epicurean scholar that you all are. I'm just trying to figure out how we all live successfully on this planet, have the planet do well under our tutelage, and have the future evolve constructively (in the broad perspective of that word).

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 13, 2023 at 3:00 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I think constantly in terms of "we" rather than "me". And, in the consideration of "we" I need to ask who would pay the price if I think only of me.

I've been thinking lately about modern civilization and the idea of "progress". Are we happier now than before we had all the modern inventions and modern medicine? Why are teens committing suicide and shooters going to malls and killing people? Perhaps "progress" has not been made in the right places. People fear death and then try everything to prolong life, even though their quality of life is very unsatisfactory (if they cannot do everyday things and must have an attendant wash and help them toilet). Modern medicine is failing us, in that we live long but then are plagued by dementia.

So perhaps [BrainToBeing](#) your deep question is likely: "Who will take care of society and all the things that are required, including the self-sacrifice of leaders and workers, and all who do the work to make things "better"? In response I say: all over the world you can see that the political realm is full of corruption. And people are polarized between "religious-conservative "right-wrong" vs. democratic freedoms.

So I say the the "we" is not working. The "we" is corrupt. And we don't currently have a solution for this problem.

People ignore the fact that if they act in a manner in which others are harmed, then there will be bad consequences. The consequences I speak of are multifaceted. Epicurean philosophy reminds us of these consequences -- in which my long-term well-being will have a poor outcome whenever I cause harm to others - because by human nature we all have a drive to survive and stand up for ourselves when we are harmed (except for some who are so downtrodden that they cannot stand up for themselves). What ever we do will turn around and come back to us in some manner - and we can see that at play in current world events.

Post by “Don” of December 13, 2023 at 3:08 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

And, yes, I realize that "down in the weeds" of "pleasure" is the idea that self-sacrifice may be interpreted as personal "pleasure". However, I can certainly tell you that doing what was right, rather than what was pleasurable, was not pleasure in many, many situations (long story with many elements).

From my perspective, that is actually the point. Don't dismiss those weeds too lightly. Are you able or willing to admit to yourself that doing what you felt was "right" was pleasurable to you. Feeling that you did the correct action *was* pleasurable. If you want to say that doing what you felt was right brought you a sense of satisfaction, I can see that. But satisfaction is a type of pleasure in long run.

Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2023 at 4:04 PM

Yes Don's post get's right to the point. If you are the type of person who values the longer-term "satisfaction" that comes from your actions, then what you are talking about is just a different name for the feeling that you get from that work.

The real heart of the matter is whether the Platonists and others were right to label only agreeable immediate sensory stimulation as pleasure and disagreeable immediate sensory stimulation as pain. Epicurus goes right to the heart of the matter and says that it is the

feeling that is the ultimate way to decide, not your "intellectual" assessment of it by some abstract logical standard.

And it is equally important to say that we aren't playing simple word games with "pleasure." Sometimes it can sound like that because we have first-world attitudes privileges that lead us to think that rearranging our kitchens and our recipes to produce maximum eating pleasure is all we need to worry about.

Epicurus was a *philosopher*, not a cook or a medical doctor. The big issues that drive the world in his time and in ours are the ultimate questions of whether (1) there are supernatural gods, (2) whether there is life after death with reward or punishment, (3) whether there are logical absolute ideals, or (4) whether there is only what Nature gives us directly by which we should live.

Epicurus held that if we want to deal with reality then (1), (2), and (3) are out of the question, as they simply do not exist given the nature of the universe. That leaves us with (4) which resolves down to "feeling" and it ultimately makes sense to realize that there are really only two types of feelings, those that are agreeable (Pleasure) and those that are disagreeable (Pain).

We're talking in this thread in very precise medical terms as if Epicurus were standing over our shoulder pointing out specific things to do and not to do, even though he lived 2000 years ago and had no idea of the technology we have and the way we live today. Certainly he had specific pieces of advice to the effect that seeking unlimited power, unlimited money, unlimited fame, or to live forever are unattainable and will be damaging if we make them our goals. We can derive a lot of useful "life coach" information from what he had to say.

But if you skip over the ultimate philosophical war in favor of the clinical details then you never understand the big picture. The big picture is FIRST that these false guides of life do not exist. That in itself is a very heavy lift for most people. The flag that Epicurus raises is indeed called "Pleasure" but that's a generic term for agreeable mental and bodily feelings, and those do exist, and they stand in the same rank and compete with the alternatives of supernatural gods and ideal forms and "logic" and "virtue" and things like that which either do not exist or are at best tools for something else.

In the end it's very possible to reconcile "satisfaction" and "worthwhile things" etc etc with "pleasure," and if you spend time with Epicurus you will see how he does that.

What's *NOT* possible to reconcile with Epicurus is supernatural gods, and ideal forms, and essences and logical abstractions and any other sort of absolutist things or principles that can tell us what to do.

The title of Lucretius' Poem is generally translated as "The Nature of Things" -- but Rolphe Humphries translates it as "The Way Things Are" and I'd say also something like "The Nature of

Reality" are more indicative of what is really at stake.

Atoms and void and all the theories that come from them give us ways to come to terms with reality, and that's the first and most important goal. Once you orient yourself to the reality that the only guide you have is the physical pleasure and pain that Nature gives you, it's relatively easy to come up with a rational pleasure and pain analysis of all the rest. But the nature of reality is the place to start -- the ethics follow from that.

Post by "Pacatus" of December 13, 2023 at 4:08 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

From my perspective, that is actually the point. Don't dismiss those weeds too lightly. Are you able or willing to admit to yourself that doing what you felt was "right" was pleasurable to you. Feeling that you did the correct action **was** pleasurable. If you want to say that doing what you felt was right brought you a sense of satisfaction, I can see that. But satisfaction is a type of pleasure in long run.

[Don](#) : And that is an example of choosing a particular mental pleasure as outweighing any pains that might be involved. ***Does the Stoic feel displeasure/dissatisfaction - or displeased/disgusted with herself - in following her virtue-ideals? I sincerely doubt it.*** That does not mean that she might not experience great suffering in the instance (even unto death).

But (as I think has already been mentioned) the articulable "why" for such choices may come after an innate (evolutionary) urge to which we are responding - based on our survival needs as largely social animals.

In the social context, it is difficult to maximize the chances of living a life of wellbeing without some sort of social compact to neither harm nor be harmed. We can argue over whether such choices are (or "should be") made out of long-term personal interest or some categorically-commanded virtue-ideal (or some evolutionarily embedded feeling-response we might call conscience) - but Epicureanism is certainly (to my view) affirming of policies that would come under the headings of social justice or social wellbeing (which does not necessarily imply some simplistic utilitarian formula). And that means making choices that take into account the wellbeing of others (not of our particular group) - and a weighing of choices, just as in a personal hedonic calculus. Also, some goods are public goods (e.g., public health efforts to prevent the spread of infectious disease), such that denying them to someone else may well cause me harm/ill-being (e.g., I, or people I care about, do get infected).

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Of course, it's easy to sling judgments back and forth:

"You're not enough of a virtuous person if you think that way! You're just selfish – even when you're doing something for others!"

"And you're deluded if you think you get no – at least a priori – satisfaction from your virtue claims! When was the last time you berated yourself for being so good?!"

"What do you mean I'm evolutionarily wired for certain virtues? I have free will!"

"And what about sadists?! And masochists?!"

And on and on and on ...  

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Myself when young did eagerly frequent

Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument

About it and about: but evermore

Came out by the same door where in I went.

- Edward FitzGerald: The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám; Fifth Edition, Quatrain XXVII

O, now to let those arguments go by

as I hear the call of a gentler band:

I offer wine and laughter ere we die –

and, if you need, a free and open hand.

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 13, 2023 at 4:33 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The "we" is corrupt. And we don't currently have a solution for this problem.

Thanks Kalosyni. We are an evolved species, but the evolution we came from now propagates old behavior patterns.

In my mind, actually we do have potential solutions. The core issue, IMO, is that we come from a predator lineage. In fact, we stand as life's current apex predator. Yet, that is coming back to roost in this era. It is the foundation of our angst. However, we can also see that there are those who rise above the predator mindset. Women do it more than men. There are those who don't "root for my team" on the weekend football game but rather take care of "the family" (used metaphorically). In this era, that transition is typically not appreciated for its meaning, and certainly seen as "not playing ball" by those who are tribal. Yet, the transition has started. We will learn to understand where the "not tribal" mindset comes from, and how to nourish it. AI might even help us in this regard, if we don't first use it to propagate tribalism.

There is reason to hope. And, even if there wasn't. I prefer to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 13, 2023 at 4:59 PM

One thing that is commonly missed is that EP is a philosophy of personal responsibility. In a world in which there is no supernatural god, no afterlife, no absolute forms or essences, how do we avoid nihilism and live our lives? This is the context in which pleasure and pain are the guides. Some people choose abstract ideas such as virtue for a guide, but what is that other than a mental construct? Some people choose sex, drugs and R&R, but I question whether this is being aware of their pain or simply papering over it.

Pleasure and pain are innate, biological tools for guidance. To properly use them one must delve into the nuances of their own awareness and come to terms with what they find, keeping in mind that there is no neutral state. Often what appears to be neutral, when examined, contains pains and pleasures that we've just never noticed. That's where the real work takes place.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 13, 2023 at 5:47 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I think constantly in terms of "we" rather than "me". And, in the consideration of "we" I need to ask who would pay the price if I think only of me. So, for example, when practicing medicine I very clearly knew the agenda was to do what was appropriate for the patient, and not just beneficial to my pleasure.

So, are you really thinking in terms of "we" – which, by definition, also includes you (because "we" is relational)? Or are you saying that you think "constantly" only of others – and not yourself at all? (Rhetorical question: I don't think you're saying that at all.)

Does caring for others by practicing medicine (as opposed to practicing medicine just to enrich yourself) cause you to feel generally dissatisfied with your life? Does it displease you? I doubt it. Do mutually self-affirming and caring (loving) relationships bother you because the "we" includes you and your pleasure, as well as that of the other? I doubt it. Do you enjoy loving the people you love in those "we" relationships? I suspect so.

Epicurus extolled friendship. Friendship is a "we" relation. I think it's foolish (and delusive) to imagine we can extend that "we relation" without bounds. Even if we're thinking globally, we still act locally (and no one has a god's-eye "view from nowhere") – or else we likely end up flailing impotently. You may have a concern for all humanity, but you treat one patient at a time. But I also think it's foolish to try to limit our concerns (for some of the "public goods" reasons I alluded to) to our own little band. So, we do recognize that we are necessarily and inescapably part of larger social "we" relations. And we inescapably end up weighing the effects of our choices on our nearer "we's" relative to the larger "we's". (In your profession, maybe the word "triage" is sometimes applicable?)

Although ideals and other abstractions (like "virtue") can be seductive, all our choices are always concrete:

"When it comes to shaping one's personal behavior, all the rules of morality, as precise as they may be, remain abstract in the face of the infinite complexity of the concrete."

—Hans Urs von Balthasar, Roman Catholic theologian

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Am I virtuous? I don't know. Am I less kind and compassionate in my behavior than when I was steeped in idealist Christian/Kantian virtue-morality? It doesn't seem so. Am I less concerned about "social justice" issues? I don't think so (though, in my elder years, I am less directly active). Do I care if anyone thinks I'm not sufficiently virtuous/righteous/good? Not really. I just don't think in those terms anymore. Do I "feel good" about my choices after (Hemingway)? Sometimes yes, sometimes no; when "no," I try to ask why and amend – and do better next time. But that "feeling good" just *is* pleasure. Call it conscience if you wish; the feeling is the guide, the rationales (important as they are) come after.

Like [TauPhi](#) , I'm just a guy on the internet drawing on Epicurean philosophy – as best I understand it – to inform my own choices. I may understand it differently tomorrow. In the end, Epicurus – like all the Hellenistic schools – thought of philosophy as a process of therapy, not just an intellectual exercise.

Post by “frank1syl” of December 13, 2023 at 5:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I wonder whether it's not more practical to line things up in order of significance in terms of pain and pleasure, and then to deal with them in that order (considering whether they can be changed or not as part of the analysis)?

I would like to hear some examples of what Cassius says above. Let's say the situation is this: Sally has decided to follow the path of Epicureanism, much to the chagrin of her close-knit family of Catholics. She is experiencing a lot of mental anguish over the comments family members make (I'll let ya'll imagine what they are saying to her). Sally says to herself, "I think it would be practical to line things up in order of significance in terms of pain and pleasure and then deal with this situation in order of what I can change entirely, what I might be able to partially change, and what I can't change at all as part of my analysis of pain and pleasure." How would you line things up for Sally?

If I were Sally, perhaps I might make a list of family-related pain and pleasure:

1. Pain of being separated from my family, pleasure of being with my family.
2. Pain of falling into discord with family, pleasure of being in accord with them.
3. Pain of being separated from family, pleasure of finding and making a new "family" with like-minded Epicureans.

For each item on this list there are some aspects of it which are up to me (e.g. staying or leaving, being kind or rude), some aspects which are only partially up to me (e.g. choosing not to argue while family continue to try to argue), and some aspects which are not up to me at all (e.g. my family decides to shun me).

Post by “Pacatus” of December 13, 2023 at 6:14 PM

[frank1sy](#)

Can we talk about pleasure versus displeasure in making lists? 😊 (Okay, bad joke.) 😞

Every action you list, but for shunning by her family, is up to her – including refusing to argue back, even if that means walking away each and every time. (I've been in some very fraught and emotionally debilitating situations that I had to leave; hopefully, I would handle them better today – generally by being willing to leave sooner.) But I want to point out that 2. involves a question of self-honesty or pretense, and potentially damaging cognitive dissonance. So I don't think that feigning accord is a sustainable option for anyone's wellbeing.

With that said, I don't see how the pleasure of staying with what you've implied are, essentially, an emotionally abusive family could possibly outweigh the pain – unless they desist from their behavior when Sally is around.

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 13, 2023 at 10:19 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

So, are you really thinking in terms of “we” – which, by definition, also includes you (because “we” is relational)? Or are you saying that you think “constantly” only of others – and not yourself at all?

"We" definitely includes me. In my view, the journey is partly about discovering and honing the balance that comes from respect - self and others. I am in the process of creating some YouTube videos on "self" - how we develop it, how we can repair it. And in those perspectives I discuss (or soon will discuss) how the "self-other" dynamic is established, and repaired where that is necessary. Too much self builds narcissism. Too much other builds neurosis. And in the middle is balance - a "we" that includes you and me. (Intentionally, there is no link and no self-advocacy here. This is about "we", not "me".)

Cheers