

The Axiology of Pain and Pleasure (are they intrinsic good/bad ?)

Post by “Matteng” of May 27, 2024 at 2:42 PM

Hi all,

I´ve found a challenging article which questions the "goodness" of Pleasure and the "badness" of Pain and problems with hedonism.

For example some statements are:

- Pleasure/Pain developed in biological evolution as a means to self-preservation and reproduction so it is not an ultimate good (yes but that is for the genes not for the happy self (eudaimonia) or ?
- Some have Pleasure in feeling Pain, so Pain cannot be ultimate bad.

...

What is your opinion about the statements and/or defense of Pleasure/Pain.

I have some in my mind but would be interested in responses here in the forum.

It got my attention via an provocative article from the modern Stoic Massimo Pigliucci:

[Why Epicureans and Utilitarians are wrong: on the axiology of pain and pleasure](#)

Attached is the PDF.

Post by “Don” of May 27, 2024 at 4:33 PM

Thank you for posting this! I read up to the point where a free subscription was needed, and I looked at the PDF of the academic paper.

Pigliucci is, of course, the Stoic's Stoic (in the modern sense). In light of that, I wouldn't expect him to be any more charitable to Epicurus than Epictetus was.

My take on the general direction of the article and the paper is that Epicurus addresses many if not all) of their concerns. For example, the conclusion of the paper begins:

Quote

Consider how broad the scope of moral choice is which involves choosing between two good options, or choosing the lesser of two evils, or any consequentialist trade-offs between what is intrinsically good and bad. Now, consider how many of these choices are made while thinking that pleasures automatically count as good and pains automatically count as bad. *If we started denying the goodness of pleasure per se and the badness of pain per se, if we started thinking of these merely as (un)pleasant but without intrinsic value, the effects on our choices would be enormous. If we taught ourselves the proper functions of pain, if we cease to be fooled by the supposed "intrinsic disvalue" of it, so that we do not automatically think that experiencing pain is experiencing something bad, then we would not be fooled into avoiding pains which we know are not harmful by telling ourselves that the pain itself justifies us in avoiding it.*

I'm intentionally highlighting that last section because I feel that is precisely Epicurus's position.

Pigliucci makes the error in his article about Epicurus's "freedom from pain" into an all or nothing proposition:

Quote

Epicureanism still counts as a hedonistic school, though, in part because Epicurus identified lack of pain as the highest possible pleasure.

And, yes, Epicurus did... But not for the reasons you appear to be making, Massimo. We've had extensive and on-going discussions on this forum about what that "highest pleasure = absence of pain" means, and I think we're going in the right direction. It's easy to caricature; more difficult to understand.

So, in the end, my reaction is that both the article and the paper rehash old arguments in "new wineskins" so to speak. I'll be interested to read others' takes.

Post by "Don" of May 27, 2024 at 6:04 PM

I'll also add in reference to the pain/bad - pleasure/good notion that the article and paper discuss. It appears to me that Epicurus made the pain/bad - pleasure/good argument precisely on the grounds that those parameters are really the only parameters on which you can claim

why something is "good" or "bad." I don't think he was necessarily making moral or ethical arguments. He was literally using the parameters of whether something led to more pain or more pleasure in the end. Living justly, nobly, and prudently is "good" because it allows is to live pleurably, and vice versa. Living that way isn't "good" because it's decreed from On High or because it's "virtuous" from some external definition. The authors of the paper seemed to tie themselves in knots only to conclude where Epicurus starts from.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 27, 2024 at 7:18 PM

I've downloaded the paper, although I'm not sure when I'll get to it as I've got more pleasurable endeavors lined up.

Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco and Paul Bloomfeld appear to be the authors, not Pigliucci.

Just spouting off here, but this seems to me to be an example of people with completely different mindsets talking past each other. Committed Stoics seem to be wired to try to live rationally, which to them means to set aside feelings in making choices and avoidances. Whereas committed Epicureans realize that feelings underlie rationality: ignoring them is like swimming upstream with only one arm and one leg.

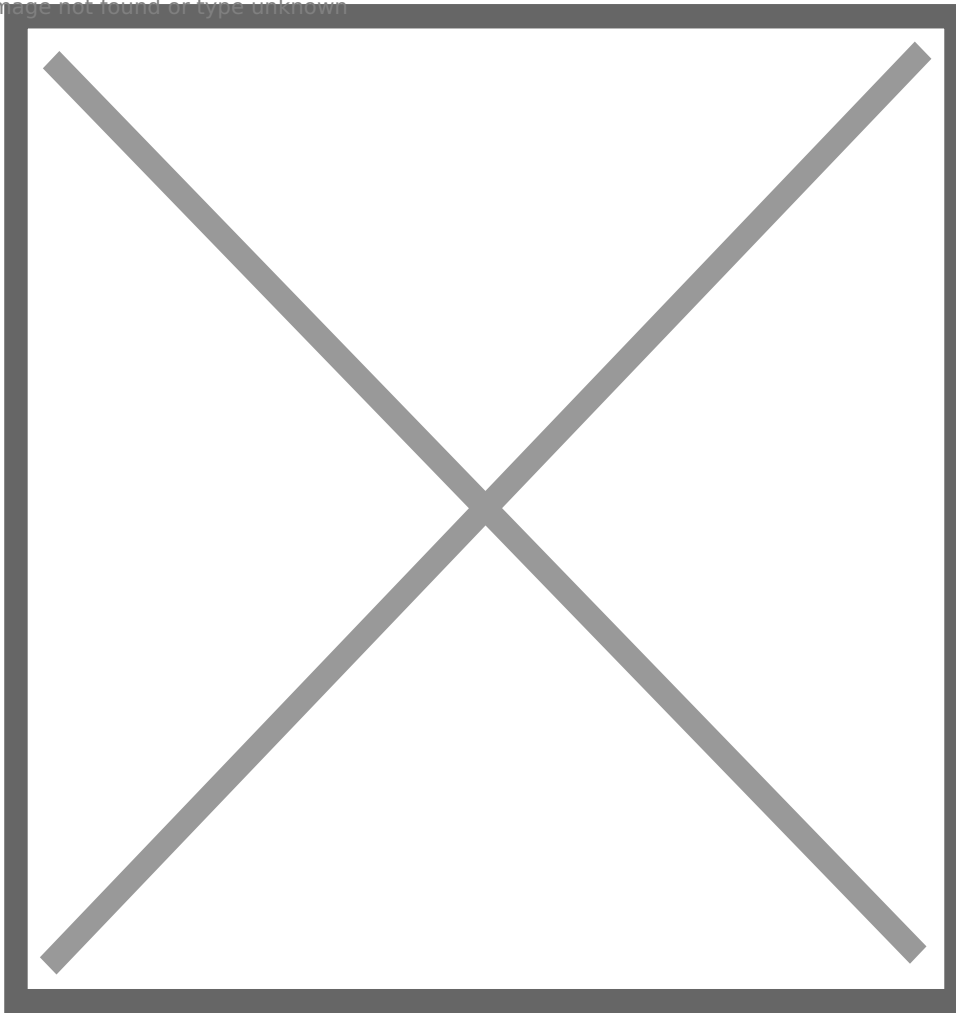
Post by “Don” of May 27, 2024 at 7:21 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco and Paul Bloomfeld appear to be the authors, not Pigliucci.

Pigliucci is the author of the article pointing to the paper:

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[Why Epicureans and Utilitarians are wrong: on the axiology of pain and pleasure](#)

Moral philosophers are beginning to incorporate insights from evolutionary biology
open.substack.com

Post by “Godfrey” of May 27, 2024 at 8:10 PM

Oops, I thought it was all the same thing 🙄

Post by “Godfrey” of May 27, 2024 at 8:35 PM

Quote

Hedonism, philosophically speaking, is “the ethical theory that pleasure (in the sense of the satisfaction of desires) is the highest good and proper aim of human life.” (Apple Dictionary)

A case can be made that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist. That might negate MP's entire argument, although he seems to be equating that with his evolutionary angle.

Where he is completely missing the boat (at least in the portion up to the pay wall) is by separating pleasure/pain from sensations and anticipations. Epicurus presented these three as a unified group of faculties with which we make decisions, supplemented by reason. By ignoring this fact he's taking the Ciceronian path of argument by omission.

Post by “Joshua” of May 27, 2024 at 11:18 PM

Pain is biologically advantageous but only up to a point. The skin->spinal cord->muscle reflex arc protects us from hot stoves and sharp objects, internal pain is symptomatic of injury or disease, and mental suffering may indicate that a change in lifestyle is needed.

But of what use is that pain that comes from vain ambition, fear of mortality, desire for limitless wealth, and terror in conceptualizing the gods? The irony of his position is that his argument *is* consequentialist. 'Pain is useful, therefore pain cannot be bad'.

Thought experiment; as it is, computers throw error messages when something goes wrong. If we could design a computer that feels pain and screams when something goes wrong, would that be an ethically neutral decision? No; pain is bad.

Post by “Matteng” of May 28, 2024 at 5:40 PM

My defense points are mainly these 3 :

1. Yes natural Evolution developed desire and the fulfilling of it (Pleasure / Pain) for preservation/reproduction. But that (preservation/reproduction are the intrinsic "goals" for our **genes**.

We are our self and ask for a happy life for our **self (eudaimonia)** not our genes (which we can give max. 50% further).

2. Kastastematic Pleasure /Ataraxia/Tranquility : Regards eudaimonia and our value system.

We have no Tranquility when our values are disturbed and our values come from our desires.

Maybe this point could even divorce Epicureanism from other "hedonism" (comparing DeWitts "New Hedonism" in Epicureanism) which often focus only on kinetic sensual pleasure of the "body".

- **Someone has pleasure in feeling pain** ? Isn't it more the release of the pain ? And when it gets destructive an Epicurean would go over these pleasure for kastastematic Pleasure of health.

-**Morally bad Pleasure** ? => When it would destroy friendship or the justice to others it would destroy our values, securities, good feelings/pleasures with others, chances of reciprocity advantages, bring great disturbances and destroys our kastastematic Pleasure, so an Epicurean would avoid it. Nature gave us for that feelings like compassion, empathy and good feelings(Pleasure) by helping others.

3. Faculty of Pleasure/Pain vs. feeling Pleasure/Pain for things/situations

The faculty of Pleasure/Pain is to be secured (against tranquilizers if not necessary). We want Pain as the guide when we should avoid something and Pleasure when we should pursue something.

It is our navigation system, we should not change /reduce our feelings like the Stoics but navigate in our life for Pleasure / avoiding Pain by being sensible for our feelings.

Post by "Joshua" of May 28, 2024 at 6:20 PM

Quote

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I've been trying to take a more careful approach to the language that we use when we talk about pleasure and pain, and a crucial distinction needs to be made here between 'pleasure', which is a feeling, and 'actions or choices that produce pleasure'. The feeling of pleasure is always *intrinsically* good; behaviors and decisions that produce pleasure may or may not be *instrumentally* good.

When we say that some pleasures should be chosen and some avoided, what we are really saying is that the actions we take to pursue the intrinsic good of pleasure are sometimes more likely to produce the intrinsic bad of pain. And the reverse is true is well; choosing to endure for a time the intrinsic bad of pain can often lead to greater pleasure.

These points are no less true for the masochist; if he tells me that enduring pain can be psychologically pleasureable, and that the psychological pleasure is greater than the physical pain, then he, too, is practicing choice and avoidance.

But I agree with most of what you say! I wouldn't want to lose the capacity to feel pain entirely while I still lived.

Post by “Don” of May 28, 2024 at 8:38 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

When we say that some pleasures should be chosen and some avoided, what we are really saying is that the actions we take to pursue the intrinsic good of pleasure are sometimes more likely to produce the intrinsic bad of pain. And the reverse is true is well; choosing to endure for a time the intrinsic bad of pain can often lead to greater pleasure.

Well said, [Joshua](#) !! Expanding on your post, I'd say it's our learning to choose or reject "the actions we take to pursue" the *desire* for certain pleasurable feelings that lead to more pain than pleasure that is important.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 28, 2024 at 9:38 PM

[Don](#) I like how you slipped "reject" in there in place of "avoid." Your choice of rejection is growing on me...

We can also choose or reject specific desires in addition to the actions related to them. Not *all* desires though!

For example, years ago I stopped drinking sodas. I desired to stop drinking them, chose the actions involved in not drinking them and thereby, over time eliminated the desire to drink them.

Post by “Don” of May 28, 2024 at 10:07 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Your choice of rejection is growing on me...



That gives me pleasure.

My reason, for those who haven't encountered my affinity for "rejection" over "avoidance," the Greek word used in those phrases literally means "to flee, run off, go a certain direction with haste (often with prepositions); to flee, escape, avoid, get away from (danger or trouble)." But "avoid" conveys to me something like "stepping around a puddle." The original word conveys, again, to me, something much stronger than that idea. To my ear, rejection implies more agency than simply avoidance.

Post by “Onenski” of May 29, 2024 at 5:45 PM

Hi guys, I share my point of view:

In philosophy there's something called the "naturalistic fallacy" which consists in affirming that you can't derive a normative proposition from factual ones. Naturalistic fallacy establishes a categorical distinction between the Good and how the world is. All platonic, stoic and kantian positions need this distinction to establish that the Form of the Good, Virtue or Duty are

intrinsic values.

All naturalistic projects (including Utilitarianism, Epicureanism and other hedonisms) are the object of accusations of naturalistic fallacy. Now, curiously, Pigliucci is committing a form of the fallacy by trying to reject ethical (normative) hedonism by using evolutionary biology arguments.

Let me say it clearly: science **can** falsify Epicurus' psychological hedonism, but not his ethical hedonism. The arguments against ethical hedonism **must be** philosophical (presumably ethical and metaethical).

Epicurus thought that ethical hedonism can be derived from psychological hedonism (and I consider that this is more or less clear in Torquatus' reasonings in *On Ends*). How well this works is an open question. A better argument for Pigliucci's position would be to attack this derivation, but even if it works, ethical hedonism can have more arguments on its base.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2024 at 11:23 PM

I tried to read (briefly, admittedly quick reviews of PDF papers and Wikipedia) about the "naturalistic fallacy," but I am failing to see how it is a "fallacy." I get the idea, I think. For example, from the first line of the Wikipedia article:

In philosophical ethics, the naturalistic fallacy is the claim that it is possible to define good in terms of natural entities, or properties such as pleasant or desirable. The term was introduced by British philosopher G. E. Moore in his 1903 book Principia Ethica.

From my perspective, the only real meaning of "good" is in relation to "feeling positive" either physically or psychologically. I'll call that "good/positive feeling" "pleasant" or say that it is "pleasurable" for lack of any better term. If someone wants to go off on morals, that's up to them. The moral sense of good, The Good, etc., ultimately, it seems to me to have no other referent than that positive feeling. To remove it from that original sense is painting oneself into a corner, being trapped in a puzzle of one's own making.

Diogenes Laertius says that "[Epicurean] ethics (ἠθικὸν)... deals with things to be chosen and rejected (αἰρετῶν καὶ φευκτῶν haireton & pheukton), with the manner of living a human life (βίωσις bion), and with the end-goal. (τέλος telous.)" Ethics then applies how to actualize that positive feeling in one's life. That's it. Walking around, talking about "the good" in an abstract way is pointless. Ethics, it seems to me, in the Epicurean sense is simply how to make one's actions align with arriving at that positive physical and psychological feeling.

Post by "Onenski" of June 1, 2024 at 2:21 PM

Hi, [Don!](#)

Just in order to clarify why it is considered a fallacy, think about this exaggerated example. Imagine that, in a community, people believe that men should work and women should stay at home. They might say: "for generations things have been like this, it's the natural order, it must be like this". Philosophers say that this reasoning is wrong, because they are inferring a normative proposition from factual propositions. They're inferring an *ought* from an *is*.

Curiously, the recognition of this kind of problematic reasonings is found first in David Hume. Moore took it and developed it in order to defend his idealistic theory of the Good.

Now, for more clarification, the paragraph you quote from Wikipedia takes the metaethical sense of the naturalistic fallacy. The basic idea is that in a naturalistic ethical project (like the Epicurean one, for example), holding that pleasure (or any other natural entity) is good, implies that there's something in pleasure that makes it good. The question is, which property is that and why pleasure has it? For them, it implies that pleasure is a privileged entity, because it has the property of being ethically good. Here, people like Pigliucci may say that pleasure has an evolutionary and instrumental origin, so it can't have the privilege of being the entity with the property of THE Good.

As you may see, this approach looks suspicious, because is taking the naturalistic Epicurean theory in a kind of platonic terms. And then, for surprise of no one, falsify it.

Post by "Cassius" of June 1, 2024 at 3:20 PM

Great post Onenski

[Quote from Onenski](#)

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For most of my life if I had read a paragraph like that - even your explanation of it, and not just someone like Pigliucci asserting it - I would have cursed under my breath and walked away convinced that such a person had nothing worthwhile to say whatsoever.

Nowadays my attitude is very different. I see that the word games involved are leaving probably 98% of the people of the world totally defenseless against the arguments of supernatural religion, nihilism, and all sorts of other depressing perspectives. And given that that is my firm conclusion that those arguments cause great practical harm, I don't think "cursing under my breach and walking away" is the appropriate response at all.

The proper response involves (1) recognizing that it doesn't matter whether the arguments are prompted maliciously by fraud or innocently in error, and (2) working appropriately to clearly state an articulate response.

That's where Epicurus comes in.

Post by “Don” of June 1, 2024 at 11:14 PM

I appreciate the additional information and perspective, [Onenski](#) ! I have some reactions:

[Quote from Onenski](#)

think about this exaggerated example. Imagine that, in a community, people believe that men should work and women should stay at home. They might say: "for generations things have been like this, it's the natural order, it must be like this". Philosophers say that this reasoning is wrong, because they are inferring a normative proposition from factual propositions. They're inferring an ought from an is.

From that example, my reaction is that that is a culturally-dependent example, not a "naturally occurring" one. The "fact" is merely built on cultural and societal norms. The feeling of pleasure - or the aversion to pain and the attraction to positive stimuli - is biological.

[Quote from Onenski](#)

The basic idea is that in a naturalistic ethical project (like the Epicurean one, for example), holding that pleasure (or any other natural entity) is good, implies that there's something in pleasure that makes it good. The question is, which property is that and why pleasure has it?

I still think the idea of "good/bad" - although Epicurus clearly uses good (agathos) and bad (kakos) - is a function of the language we have available to us. "Good" can mean "morally/ethical 'good'" but I still maintain that it is built on a fundamental meaning of positive feeling. Pleasure - according to Epicurus - is fundamentally agathos, by pleasure's nature. If we take agathos at its most basic meaning, it is something that is useful for a purpose, and from that springs all other meanings. I'm not a big fan of extrapolating from etymologies, but in this case, I'll make an exception. Pleasure is generally useful in one's life to steer toward something positive. Can pleasure's usefulness be short-circuited? Of course. An easy example is drinking too much alcohol, although some alcohol seems to have societal and personal benefits ([Check out this episode of The Next Big Idea](#)). Extrapolating this to a "moral" or "ethical" "good" isn't necessarily necessary.

[Quote from Onenski](#)

As you may see, this approach looks suspicious, because is taking the naturalistic Epicurean theory in a kind of platonic terms



Exactly, and well put! It seems like they're saying, "We're not going to play by your rules. We reject your rules, and replace them with our own!" ... sigh...

Post by “Little Rocker” of June 3, 2024 at 5:41 PM

Sorry to blunder into this late and quite possibly confuse things further, but here's a quote from the original Pigliucci piece:

Quote

Evolutionarily speaking, for instance, pain is there to alert us to injuries that, if unattended, could cause long-term disability or death. Pleasure is there to entice us to do things we otherwise might not do, like engaging in the biologically all-important activities of courtship and sex (which are otherwise expensive in terms of time and

resources). Put this way, it is clear what the only ultimate goods that nature set for us (and for all living organisms) are: survival and reproduction.

I'm taking this to be at least one of the reasons the naturalistic fallacy occurred to Onenski because Pigliucci is offering what might appear to be a textbook case.

So maybe another example would capture the relevant worry: Imagine an evolutionary biologist says, 'Men are naturally prone to infidelity because it's not evolutionarily advantageous for them to be monogamous. Men are just cheaters, and that's a good thing from the perspective of survival and reproduction, which are the ends nature sets for us. So we should just expect men to cheat.' That leaves a person who contends that men should aim for fidelity two options-- show that cheating is not actually adaptive (i.e. challenge the scientist's empirical claim) or decide that what is good for us/right for us is not governed by what is evolutionarily advantageous.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 3, 2024 at 9:10 PM

Might one also contest the evolutionary biology approach by pointing out that evolution occurs over such a large span of time as to be meaningless for practical human ethics?

"Survival and reproduction" is, of course, an extremely cynical conclusion to reach regarding the value of pain and pleasure: a sledgehammer approach lacking any nuance. And anyone who seriously studies the ethics of pleasure and pain can point out that much of the value is in the nuance.

Perhaps MP's approach could also be analyzed in terms of scale, in this case the scale of time and of numbers. A physical analogy could be the scale of the universe, of man, of atoms. An understanding of the various scales is useful, but it's necessary to have a correct understanding of how the various scales apply to the scale of a human life physically, temporally and numerically in order to make use of the understanding.

Post by “Don” of June 3, 2024 at 11:17 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

That leaves a person who contends that men should aim for fidelity two options--show that cheating is not actually adaptive (i.e. challenge the scientist's empirical claim) or decide that what is good for us/right for us is not governed by what is evolutionarily advantageous.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Might one also contest the evolutionary biology approach by pointing out that evolution occurs over such a large span of time as to be meaningless for practical human ethics?

It seems to me that [Little Rocker](#) and [Godfrey](#) are both onto something. While we are the products of evolution, we don't make choices and rejections based on evolutionary considerations in the here and now in this one life that we have. In this life, infidelity can (and likely will) lead to pain, both in an individual relationship and rippling through societal relationships. If someone is unfaithful to another in a relationship, that unfaithful person can be seen by others as being untrustworthy; hence leading to more pain for the unfaithful partner. There is a chance that there may also be actual physical pain involved should the other party in the relationship exact "revenge" on the unfaithful party. And if not revenge right away, there may be revenge later. It may be easy to commit infidelity undetected, but impossible to be sure that you have escaped detection... to paraphrase a Vatican Saying.

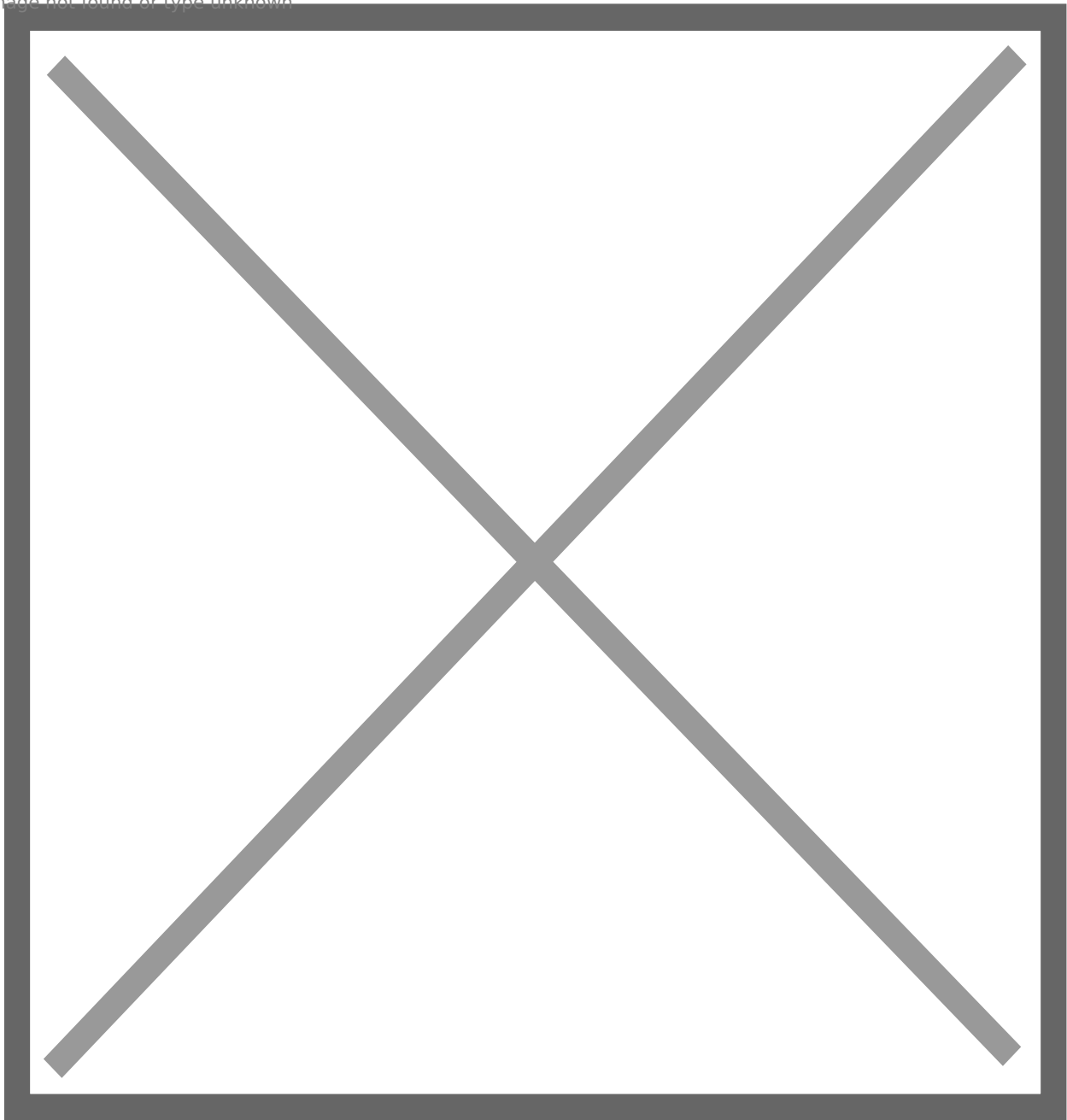
PS...

Quote from Little Rocker

'Men are naturally prone to infidelity because it's not evolutionarily advantageous for them to be monogamous....

This got me thinking of animals that do pair bond as part of their *natural* behaviors. And I realize one can't necessarily extrapolate among all these species nor does the concept of "infidelity" translate across species, but a purely "it's natural" (above and beyond the universal feelings of pleasure/pain) is not the slam -dunk argument some feel it is. There are societal and cultural considerations. Which is why, it seems to me, the last few seconds of *Principle Doctrines* talks about justice and living in a social setting.

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[6 Animal Species that Mate for Life](#)

Mating for life is relatively uncommon in the animal kingdom. Find out which animals, from gray wolves to macaroni penguins, are in it for the long haul.

www.britannica.com

<https://www.bbcearth.com/news/seven-animals-who-mate-for-life>

(Oh, and [Godfrey](#) , you're welcome to reconsider your 👍 after I added my PostScript 😊)

Post by “Cassius” of June 4, 2024 at 6:48 AM

Confession: I have been distracted and not read each post in this thread thoroughly. However I did read Don's last post and had this immediate question:

[Quote from Don](#)

While we are the products of evolution, we don't make choices and rejections based on evolutionary considerations in the here and now in this one life that we have.

Would that not be better worded with some kind of caveat that "we need to be cautious in making choices based on evolutionary considerations..." rather than "we don't..." because:

- in fact many people often "do" make choices that way, even though it "may" be shortsighted.... and

- in an Epicurean perspective without fate or necessity or a providential god force, "sometimes" a decision to go against the generally-observable rule (*I gather we all agree that the general rule is to the effect that blindly following evolution in every case is generally a bad idea*) will in fact work out and be the proper choice in some circumstances?

I suspect Don's wording in context probably presumes that this is a "general rule" and not an "ironclad rule" but I tend to worry that there are too many people who think that Epicurus' observations about how behavior generally but not always leads to particular results are intended to be "ironclad" rules from which never to deviate, which I think would not be likely to be the way he intended them.

I also say this in context that I think Don and I sometimes come across as interpreting [PD10](#) differently on this very point I am bringing up here, even though I don't think our positions are actually very different. I see [PD10](#) as emphasizing the very point that I want to be sure is not misunderstood here.

Also, for those who were on the Zoom call last night, I raise this also because of the example we discussed about the current Boeing astronauts who are having difficulty getting launched into space. We "generally" don't undertake high-risk activities that could lead to death, but "sometimes" we consider the reward in pleasure / reduction of pain worth the risk, even of death.

I suspect Don and I here too are in full agreement, but we express the issue slightly differently.

Post by “Don” of June 4, 2024 at 7:49 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Would that not be better worded with some kind of caveat that "we need to be cautious in making choices based on evolutionary considerations..." rather than "we don't..." because:

- in fact many people often "do" make choices that way, even though it "may" be shortsighted.... and

I'm not sure I necessarily agree that that's better wording; however, I may not be conveying what I'm trying to convey. What I'm trying to convey is that humans don't make decisions based on "evolutionary" considerations. Humans make decisions based primarily on self-interest, or perceived self-interest, what they feel will lead to pleasure for them. That's the root of psychological hedonism as I understand it. People may use "evolution made me do it" as a rationalization or justification post facto. But I doubt anyone is making a decision solely for by saying "My evolution dictates that I do this thing." People make decisions on the spur of the moment all the time based on instinct and fight/flight responses ingrained by biological evolution. So, in that sense, they "do" make choices that way, and, yes, these "may" be shortsighted... but that's saying - it seems to me - that they were necessitated or were inevitable, when Epicurus states clearly that decisions should be made using practical wisdom and not solely on ingrained, biological urges or proclivities.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

- in an Epicurean perspective without fate or necessity or a providential god force, "sometimes" a decision to go against the generally-observable rule (I gather we all agree that the general rule is to the effect that blindly following evolution in every case is generally a bad idea) will in fact work out and be the proper choice in some circumstances?

I added emphasis on your word "choice". It's not a "choice." In fact, it seems to me to be the opposite of a choice if one is "blindly following." And, yes, sometimes things work out by dumb luck, but, according to Epicurus, "it is better to be unfortunate rationally than fortunate irrationally."

And, yes, we've gone round and round on [PD10](#) in the past. To state my position, I think [PD10](#) is cautionary. To review:

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). (Saint-Andre translation)

I see this as cautionary and not necessarily proscriptive. Sure, you can engage in the delights of the decadent, but it's not going to "wash away the mind's fears" IF it did, we'd have no problem with it... but *it doesn't*. I'm also looking at the verb tenses here in Greek. That's one reason for my conclusion, but also just the general tenor of the statement and what he says in the Letter to Menoikeus.

I'll assume I've cleared up nothing and merely muddied the waters with this reply 😊

Post by “Cassius” of June 4, 2024 at 8:22 AM

I think before I comment further I better read back into the history of the thread more closely 😊 because:

[Quote from Don](#)

What I'm trying to convey is that humans don't make decisions based on "evolutionary" considerations. Humans make decisions based primarily on self-interest, or perceived self-interest, what they feel will lead to pleasure for them. That's the root of psychological hedonism as I understand it.

And yes psychological hedonism came up last night too so I definitely see that term as related, but I continue to find the term confusing at best. Just because people make decisions based on what they think is in their self-interest does not in my mind advance the analysis of whether they are in fact acting to pursue "pleasure." And the analysis of whether they are in fact acting to pursue pleasure, rather than in pursuit of "duty" or "piety" or some other consideration, is the main issue worth discussing because it's the way to practical changes in behavior. We can discuss "duty" or "piety" in terms of the pleasure they bring all day long, but in the end what we're trying to accomplish is to decide if "duty" or "piety" are in themselves pleasurable, or whether they or anything else is worth pursuing only because they bring pleasure as a result of pursuing them.

Yes this whole sidebar discussion may be more confusing and awkward than it is worth.

Post by “Don” of June 4, 2024 at 8:57 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes this whole sidebar discussion may be more confusing and awkward than it is worth.

On the contrary, I think it's right on point.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We can discuss "duty" or "piety" in terms of the pleasure they bring all day long, but in the end what we're trying to accomplish is to decide if "duty" or "piety" are in themselves pleasurable, or whether they or anything else is worth pursuing only because they bring pleasure as a result of pursuing them.

I think this strikes right at the heart of why Epicurean and not Stoic philosophy. I don't think anything is inherently pleasurable in and of itself. That strikes me as almost Platonic. Pleasure and Pain are subjective feelings. Pain less so (eg., hand on a hot stove) but still its in the mix. "Duty" and "piety" are instrumental to a pleasurable life, see [PD05](#) et al. They are worth pursuing ONLY because they bring pleasure. Someone may say they're doing it because of "duty" but my contention will continue to be that they're doing because it feels good to say "I did my duty."

Post by "Cassius" of June 4, 2024 at 9:14 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Someone may say they're doing it because of "duty" but my contention will continue to be that they're doing because it feels good to say "I did my duty."

Yes your contention will remain that, and the professor of psychological hedonism can say that to his patient all day long as a means of diagnosing that person's psychology. And in turn the person who is being accused of being a "psychological hedonist," but who in fact sees himself as a person of strong religious or humanist belief, can deny that label all day long.

In the meantime, in the real world of people who want to think about options as to how they can change their beliefs and thought processes in order to live better, rather than just talk past each other, it is useful first and foremost make this basic conceptual / philosophical point:

1. Duty is not inherently pleasurable.

2. Piety is not inherently pleasurable.
3. Virtue is not inherently pleasurable.
4. Only pleasure is inherently pleasurable.

Then afterwards if a professor wants to discuss a clinical diagnosis of erroneous behavior, for example as to why a person might consider himself to be devoted to "duty," then terms like "psychological hedonism" will allow that professor to write cool articles for "Psychology Today."

But for ordinary people who just want plain talk about how to live better, the approach found in pages of "Psychology Today" are not the first place to start. The writers in Psychology Today will talk themselves in circles about different ways to diagnose conditions, without ever taking a firm position on what "mental health" actually looks like.

The place to start is for example the letter to Menoecus: "[129] And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. 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."



Clarification: I am not criticizing your particular use of the term, Don, or saying that you are talking past anyone. I have this same problem whenever the term "psychological hedonism" comes up in any context. It seems to me that applying the term "psychological hedonism" rarely if ever leads to anything useful. For much the same reason I really don't like the term "hedonism" either. It conveys all the wrong implications in modern usage that even the word "pleasure" does not have, so I personally never like to talk about Epicurean philosophy as "hedonism" or "hedonist." I understand the technical labels in a technical context but I find them very harmful in regular usage. Adding "psychological" to "hedonism" to me just adds a "deterministic" overlay that, from an Epicurean point of view, just digs the hole deeper. 😊

Post by "Little Rocker" of June 4, 2024 at 10:01 AM

These are some half-baked thoughts, but I agree with Cassius that the worry about psychological hedonism is that it seems nearly unfalsifiable, and it's not going to convince the person who insists they act for reasons other than pleasure/advantage. If the point is convincing others, then asserting psychological hedonism is almost tantamount to begging the question, even if it turns out to be empirically correct.

I wonder sometimes whether the root question is whether people think duty and virtue should make them miserable or whether they hope to be pleased, or at least satisfied, to be a dutiful and virtuous person. And if they say, 'I want to be the sort of person for whom doing my duty makes me miserable,' then I would find that strange.

I've never quite known what to do with Epicurus' insistence that virtuous people will experience the greatest pleasure and that people who experience the greatest pleasure must be virtuous. But I'm not entirely sure it's all that different than the Stoic view that the virtuous person will enjoy their virtue. So in my mind, people might insist they are motivated by duty, and for all I know they are in their own cognitive economy, but it would be/should be a grave disappointment to them if that motivation did not terminate in some fashion in a sense of satisfaction with themselves. And I tend to think, as an Epicurean, and as reflected in the word 'terminate,' that people actually infer backwards from 'what will give me the feeling about myself and my aims that I want' to 'duty' or 'virtue.' Which means that the final aim is the feeling, and I'm with Don--it seems reasonable to call that feeling (at least a kind of) pleasure. And virtue is the instrument, not the aim.

Post by “Don” of June 4, 2024 at 10:06 AM

Okay, I *think* I follow you.

I'm using "psychological hedonism" as an expedient shorthand for "pleasure is the guide, goal, and end of all our actions."

From my perspective...

People are dutiful, because it ultimately brings them pleasure.

People are pious because it ultimately brings them pleasure.

Continually asking "Why do you do that?" will, if the person is honest, ultimately result in the answer "Because it makes me feel good." Otherwise, I believe people are fooling themselves... Sometimes quite effectively and thoroughly, but fooling themselves nonetheless.

Post by “Cassius” of June 4, 2024 at 10:10 AM

Yes Don and I sound like we are very far apart but I don't think we really are. I think we're mainly talking "context" of when certain words are appropriate and when they are not.

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I've never quite known what to do with Epicurus' insistence that virtuous people will experience the greatest pleasure and that people who experience the greatest pleasure must be virtuous.

I can't figure out any way to reconcile that other than to conclude that Epicurus is drastically modifying the usage of the term "virtue" just like he is drastically modifying the usage of the terms "gods" and "pleasure." It seems to me that the only way to make sense of it is that Epicurus is deleting the "absolute" aspect that everyone else alleges to be a requirement of virtue, and declaring classification of a thing as virtuous to be relative to the result that it brings. His view seems to me to be that if an action does not *in fact* lead to "pleasure," then that action is by Epicurean definition not "wise," or "just," or "courageous," or any other usage of a term of virtue.

Post by “Cassius” of June 4, 2024 at 10:31 AM

Don I wish you had been at our Zoom last night to discuss with Kalosyni her [Boeing astronaut / rocket ship question](#). Pursuing that at some point would advance this discussion too, because she has a position on what Epicurus would say to those astronauts that raises a lot of questions.

I think this current issue of how to look at virtue and psychological hedonism is in the same category.

It appears to me that we have to accept that Epicurus was using the terms "pleasure" and "gods" and even "virtue" in a totally nonstandard way, and that he was asserting that changing the paradigm on how those terms are used is essential for happy living.

That's why I see the "logical extreme" interpretation of [PD10](#) as so important -- I see Epicurus as saying that "IF we look at things his way," then a "pleasurable life" is a "pleasurable life" no matter what type of pleasure it contains, because we are using the term pleasure in a logically consistent way. From that perspective [PD10](#) is an in-your-face assertion that pleasure is pleasure.

I interpret your view of [PD10](#) as focusing on the "but it won't work because it is not possible part." Yes in practical terms that is true, but stopping there does not advance the philosophical

argument.

Looking at things in a conceptually rigorous way, "IF a life of debauchery did in fact bring a pleasurable life" means that for purposes of discussion we are accepting that result -- and thus we would have no problem with such a person.

Staying with the "But it won't work" never gets you to the point - which is that pleasure must be seen as pleasure no matter what type of pleasure it is, if we are going to be able to discuss these things coherently.

Similarly, "gods" must be seen as non-supernatural and non-omniscient and non-omnipotent, no matter how many people disagree.

"Pleasure" must be seen as *every* experience of life that is not specifically painful, no matter how vigorously Cicero disagrees.

And "virtue" must be seen as totally contextual (that action which leads to pleasure) regardless of how strongly the religious and rationalist absolutists object.

Post by "Don" of June 4, 2024 at 11:10 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That's why I see the "logical extreme" interpretation of [PD10](#) as so important -- I see Epicurus as saying that "IF we look at things his way," then a "pleasurable life" is a "pleasurable life" no matter what type of pleasure it contains, because we are using the term pleasure in a logically consistent way. From that perspective [PD10](#) is an in-your-face assertion that pleasure is pleasure is pleasure.

I'll have to dig back in, but I don't think the language supports that interpretation, especially in light of the letter to Menoikeus. It seems to me he's giving practical advice in [PD10](#), not necessarily making a grand philosophical point. I see this as directly countering the Cyrenaic position.

But I'll need to revisit this tonight after work.

Post by "Cassius" of June 4, 2024 at 11:17 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't think the language supports that interpretation, especially in light of the letter to Menoikeus. It seems to me he's giving practical advice in [PD10](#), not necessarily making a grand philosophical point. I

Yes, that is exactly the point we have generally differed in the past, and continue to differ (respectfully!) 😊 While I agree with the practical observation that a life of profligacy will not *generally* lead to a good result, to me the "grand philosophical point" (a good way to describe it) is the overriding "take-away" that justifies its inclusion as a principal doctrine.

PS - I am not sure who Epicurus would have pointed to as someone who at least seems to provide such an example of profligacy being rewarded, but I gather that some later Romans might have cited Sulla, who apparently lived a pretty dissolute life and yet arguably never suffered for it, at least not in any proportion as he apparently deserved.

Quote

As promised, when his tasks were complete, Sulla returned his powers and withdrew to his country villa near [Puteoli](#) to be with his family. Plutarch states in his *Life of Sulla* that he retired to a life spent in dissolute luxuries, and he "consorted with actresses, harpists, and theatrical people, drinking with them on couches all day long." From this distance, Sulla remained out of the day-to-day political activities in Rome, intervening only a few times when his policies were involved (e.g. the execution of Granius, shortly before his own death).^{[143][144]}

His [public funeral](#) in Rome (in the Forum, in the presence of the whole city) was on a scale unmatched until that of [Augustus](#) in AD 14. Sulla's body was brought into the city on a golden bier, escorted by his veteran soldiers, and [funeral orations](#) were delivered by several eminent senators, with the main oration possibly delivered by [Lucius Marcius Philippus](#) or Hortensius. Sulla's body was [cremated](#) and his ashes placed in his tomb in the [Campus Martius](#).^[150] An epitaph, which Sulla composed himself, was inscribed onto the tomb, reading, "No friend ever served me, and no enemy ever wronged me, whom I have not repaid in full."^[151] Plutarch claims he had seen Sulla's personal motto carved on his tomb on the [Campus Martius](#). The personal motto was "no better friend, no worse enemy."

Post by "Little Rocker" of June 4, 2024 at 11:44 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I interpret your view of [PD10](#) as focusing on the "but it won't work because it is not possible part." Yes in practical terms that is true, but stopping there does not advance the philosophical argument.

I don't want to be Pollyanna here, but it seems you can both have this point--pleasure is pleasure, and all of it is good in itself--but only some strategies for pursuing it consistently bring about and sustain the most desirable state. As in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, all pleasures are good, but only some are choiceworthy. And it's true that a pleasure that is not choiceworthy in one context (participating in politics) can become choiceworthy in another (participate or die/break trust). So what counts as choiceworthy varies--it might very well be that in some contexts, flying to the moon on a whim and a prayer is choiceworthy.

Yet I think I'm with Don on PD 10, at least when coupled with PD 11. They have a remarkably similar structure, and they both seem to suggest that the people in question are not studying some important variety of natural science (the kind that, among other things, dissolves fears of death and of heavenly phenomena and also sets limits on our desires). I can't see Epicurus considering natural science negotiable.

Post by "Cassius" of June 4, 2024 at 11:56 AM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I don't want to be Pollyanna here, but it seems you can both have this point--pleasure is pleasure, and all of it is good in itself--but only some strategies for pursuing it consistently bring about and sustain the most desirable state. As in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, all pleasures are good, but only some are choiceworthy.

Yes, I agree, BOTH points are true, but I do think it is important to observe that BOTH points are true.

And I agree that you are right that both 10 and 11 are parallel - but I would say that depending upon whether one is debating philosophy, or giving personal advice to a friend, either perspective could be appropriate to emphasize.

And if I were an Epicurus or a Diogenes of Oinoanda seeking to etch "in stone" a summary of my message to all future generations, and to point out why virtually everyone else has things upside down, I'd find at least as much reason to come at this from a "grand philosophical point"

perspective as I would from a "here's my personal observation, your mileage may vary" perspective.



Post by “Don” of June 4, 2024 at 2:02 PM

In light of the text that there were no individual PDs in the original, I think [PD10](#), 11, and 12 need to be read as a unit. Both 10 and 11 start out "if .." 12 then talks about the impossibility of getting rid of the fears discussed in 10 and 11.

Lunchtime over... Back to work.

Post by “Little Rocker” of June 4, 2024 at 4:36 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And if I were an Epicurus or a Diogenes of Oinoanda seeking to etch "in stone" a summary of my message to all future generations, and to point out why virtually everyone else has things upside down, I'd find at least as much reason to come at this from a "grand philosophical point" perspective as I would from a "here's my personal observation, your mileage may vary" perspective.

I think I've gotten a bit turned around here because you and Don have a history and I feel slow on the uptake today. Cassius, can you perhaps restate the 'grand philosophical point'?

[Quote from Don](#)

I'm using "psychological hedonism" as an expedient shorthand for "pleasure is the guide, goal, and end of all our actions."

From my perspective...

People are dutiful, because it ultimately brings them pleasure.

People are pious because it ultimately brings them pleasure.

Continually asking "Why do you do that?" will, if the person is honest, ultimately result in the answer "Because it makes me feel good." Otherwise, I believe people are fooling themselves... Sometimes quite effectively and thoroughly, but fooling themselves nonetheless.

Yes, and I think Epicurus *is* a psychological hedonist of the sort you articulate here. I just find myself sympathetic to what I take to be Cassius' point that arguing about the empirical truth of psychological hedonism might not be the best dialectical strategy for convincing people to be Epicureans. I admit that I feel like I've reached a point where every time I hear a passionate argument about altruism I cry a little on the inside, even though I recognize that the possibility of altruism really matters to a lot of people. I think I've just lost sight of why it does.

Post by "Cassius" of June 4, 2024 at 5:25 PM

The term "grand philosophical point" was introduced by Don in post 31:

[Quote from Don](#)

I'll have to dig back in, but I don't think the language supports that interpretation, especially in light of the letter to Menoikeus. It seems to me he's giving practical advice in [PD10](#), not necessarily making a grand philosophical point. I see this as directly countering the Cyrenaic position.

Here's the way I would unwind the reason this dance seems to continue, because I think it's a deep issue that we see in many forms, including the nearby "astronaut" discussion.

As I perceive why Don used that term, there is an ongoing perspective question about Epicurus' use of concepts and whether he is primarily making practical points or clinical points. Is he giving personal advice about pleasure and how to pursue it moment by moment, or is he giving philosophical advice about how Plato et al are wrong, so that by examining the words that people are using we can make the differences between the schools clear. Or is he (more likely) working on both goals, since the statements he is making can be seen as true on both levels.

The point that I think generates the controversy is that there is a certain perspective held by many people that manifests itself (rightly!) in the reluctance to engage in hypotheticals or to adopt non-standard usages of words. Epicurus himself apparently refused to acknowledge the necessity to prove the desirability of pleasure, presumably for that very reason. On the other

hand, Epicurus insisted on talking about "gods" as really existing, even though he sliced away from them most of the defining characteristics that most people consider to be essential about them (supernatural, omniscient, omnipotent).

It seems to me that Epicurus clearly did "both" because if you're going to engage in philosophy you've got to explain your terms to at least some degree. Right after Torquatus noted Epicurus' reluctance to prove the desirability of pleasure by logical philosophical debate, he goes off on a long discourse that sounds very much like a logical philosophical argument. I would say that's a necessity of engaging in philosophical debate, rather than a departure from Epicurean precedent, and that Epicurus himself was doing the exact same kind of combination of logic and "pointing attention to" in statements like [PD10-12](#), and the letter to Menoecus.

It seems to me that this is the only realistic way to account for the "flatness" of Epicurus' choice to categorize all the many shades of feelings (which Cicero and everyone else in the world recognizes as different from each other) into only one of two categories, pleasure or pain. It seems to me that this flatness is a logical necessity when you accept the challenge of using only a single word to distinguish what is desirable, and a single word to distinguish what is undesirable. Rather than "virtue" or "piety," "pleasure" has to stand in that position of the single word that constitutes the placeholder for all that is desirable.

That's how it seems to me it makes most sense to read these flat "either-or" positions:

Diogenes Laertius 10:34 : *"The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined."*

And I see that as the only reasonable way to understand the flatness of the exchanges between Torquatus and Cicero in On Ends:

On Ends 1:30 : *"Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?"*

On Ends 1:38: *Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. 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. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."*

On Ends 1:39 : *For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure.*

But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure.

On Ends 2:9 : Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."

On Ends 2:11: Cicero: Still, I replied, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Clearly the same, he says, and indeed the greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be.."

Those are flat uses of the word "pleasure" that defy common usage, and yet they are logically consistent with defining pleasure as "everything in life that is desirable" as opposed to "everything in life that is undesirable."

Since Torquatus seemed to take the position that it is essential to use the terminology in this way, and since Torquatus had access to the teachers and the books that we do not, it seems to be it is reasonable to interpret the letter to Menoecus, the PD's, and the other original writings in the same way that they were being interpreted by the people who had reason to know the intent behind them.

But I will agree that taking words in these unusual ways is a tough nut for a lot of people to follow. It's normal to object to hypotheticals, and normal to object to non-standard uses of words. In the end I think we're really wrestling with questions of how to communicate when we are using words in non-standard ways. One logical way to do that is to state things in extremes: we come up with formulations that sound like *We have no cause for complaint about those who actually achieve pleasure even if we consider that pleasure to be deprived.* This second statements rings the same way: *We woud have no need for anything - even natural science that we all love - and which I've told you brings me my greatest pleasure - if we were to be able to achieve a life of pleasure without it.* Those seem to me to be stated in extreme ways, not to focus on the practical (there are a lot better ways to give practical advice than to cite extreme situations) but to make exactly the point that "pleasure" should be understood in the widest possible way as everything in life that is desirable, and pain everything in life that is undesirable.

Extreme and hypothetical formulations appear absurd to those who focus on the "practical" side alone, but maintaining the philosophical side is essential to understanding the difference between the schools is really as deep as it is - it's the only way to come up with a logically

rigorous worldview.

The "astroanaut" hypothetical comes into play because the common perception is that Epicurus is all about being satisfied with what you have and not asking "too much" out of life -- which I don't think is an accurate characterization, but if accepted would make it extremely unlikely that anyone would strap themselves onto the top of a rocket -- even one made by a manufacturer with better recent luck than Boeing!

So to wrap this into a bow, one way of looking at the "grand philosophical point" is how to view Epicurus' use of the term "pleasure." When Epicurus was using it was he focusing on describing specific feelings of the moment at particular times and places, or was he using it philosophically (as his "grand philosophical point") to represent the ultimate good, as against the opposing alternatives of "virtue" or "piety" or "reason," or was he doing both?

Post by “Pacatus” of June 4, 2024 at 6:28 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I admit that I feel like I've reached a point where every time I hear a passionate argument about altruism I cry a little on the inside, even though I recognize that the possibility of altruism really matters to a lot of people. I think I've just lost sight of why it does.

Just some off-the-cuff thoughts:

For me, altruistic acts – from an Epicurean view – can be important from two different points of view: (1) they give me pleasure (the Stoics might deny that as a criteria, but I think they tend to delude themselves with regard to their own pleasure/satisfaction on this score – as [Don](#) said); and (2) both in terms of local community and friendship, and in terms of a more extended social fabric – based on a social contract to prevent harm by means of preserving an amenable social context in which we perforce live – as instrumentally choiceworthy, even if any reciprocity is not immediately expected. In today's world, that social fabric likely includes at least some global considerations.

And perhaps pleasureable feelings of empathy are evolutionarily derived, supporting humans ability to live in any sense of community – and are still valid *pathé* today in that sense.

None of that relies on some abstract ideal of virtue or “command-morality” (as in the Stoics and Kant, say), which I heartily reject. And, it seems to me, it is the practical instrumentality that those idealists find objectionable.

It does, of course, depend on how narrowly or broadly one thinks of that term "altruism." But Epicurus did say that one might reasonably die for one's friends.

At least that's my personal reflection ...

Post by "Don" of June 4, 2024 at 11:47 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

you and Don have a history

This made me chuckle... I don't know whether I'd phrase it in quite that same way, but point taken 😊 I went back and looked, and [our "history" goes all the way back to 2020](#) (and back when I was using a nom de plume... or de guerre, as the case might be 😊)!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(respectfully!) 😊

Fully agree we need keep this difference of opinion/perspective respectful and civil!

I agree with both [Little Rocker](#) and [Cassius](#) that using terms like "psychological hedonism" don't advance the conversation in a meaningful way, and the phrase wouldn't be a useful explanation to the general reader or someone curiously coming across Epicurean philosophy. That said, I stand by my conviction [outlined in post #28 above](#): Humans are "psychological hedonists" and one of Epicurus's significant "discoveries" was to point this out and try to harness this tendency to allow us to live more pleasurable lives.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Looking at things in a conceptually rigorous way, "IF a life of debauchery did in fact bring a pleasurable life" means that for purposes of discussion we are accepting that result -- and thus we would have no problem with such a person.

IF! This is all a re-hash of my position back in 2020, for the most part. The key word there is "IF". *IF x, then y*. IF it was the case...*then* we would have no problem. And, yes, IF it was the case *the things that produce the delights of the life* of "one having no hope of safety, in desperate case; one who is, in a moral sense, abandoned; profligate" did what? If those things "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'd have no problem with them. But those *things* don't wash away the fears. They're pleasurable activities, and Epicurus never denies that. But those things alone won't get us down the road to dispelling fears. It seems to me he's saying you have get the fears dispelled first... then you can enjoy various "delights" unencumbered by those fears.

[PD10-12](#) has to be read in the context of the Letter to Menoikeus (my translation):

Therefore, whenever we say repeatedly that "pleasure is the goal (τέλος)," we do NOT say the pleasure of those who are prodigal and those stuck in delighting in pleasures arising from circumstances outside of ourselves like:*

- those who are ignorant
- those who don't agree with us, or
- those who believe wrongly;

but we mean that which neither pains the body nor troubles the mind. [132] For it is NOT an endless string of drinking parties and festivals, and NOT taking advantage of slaves and women, nor does an extravagant table of fish and other things bring forth a sweet life but self-controlled reasoning and examining the cause of every choice and rejection and driving out the greatest number of opinions that take hold of the mind and bring confusion and trouble. (emphasis added)

*ἄσωτος This is the same exact word in the Greek that is used in [PD10](#).

That section of the letter, to me, clearly states "we do NOT say the pleasure of those who are profligate" when we say "pleasure is the goal (τέλος)." There's no equivocation and no hypothetically-speaking. οὐ τὰς τῶν ἄσωτων ἡδονὰς = not the pleasure of the profligate.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

whether he is primarily making practical points or clinical points. Is he giving personal advice about pleasure and how to pursue it moment by moment, or is he giving philosophical advice about how Plato et al are wrong, so that by examining the words that people are using we can make the differences between the schools clear. Or is he (more likely) working on both goals, since the statements he is making can be seen as true on both levels.

From my perspective, Epicurus does both but in different writings and in different contexts. [Principal Doctrines](#) was meant to give an overview of the philosophy and advice on how to apply and understand the philosophy, I'm assuming, primarily for students of the Epicurean school and as a quick primer for those curious about the school. Same for the letters: hit the high points and provide instruction on how to apply the philosophy to struggling students. I don't necessarily think he needs to be working on both goals in every piece of writing.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It seems to me that this is the only realistic way to account for the "flatness" of Epicurus' choice to categorize all the many shades of feelings (which Cicero and everyone else in the world recognizes as different from each other) into only one of two categories, pleasure or pain.

It took me a minute to understand what you meant by "flatness" but I get it: You're referring to the "flat" hierarchy of two feelings: pleasure/pain. There's only two branches of the tree. I would rather characterize it as an expansive inclusion within those two feelings. This still makes sense the more I think about it: When you're alive, you're either feeling pleasure or pain, because you're always feeling *something*... If you didn't you'd be dead. It may be subtle, it may be sharp, it may be intense... but you're always feeling something. There are innumerable "feelings" and emotions within those two categories, but every sensation is either pleasurable or painful. That seems to be a very insightful discovery, and seems to be born out by current psychological affective research... but we're not going down that road 😊

Finally, I don't think Epicurus is necessarily redefining "virtue". It seems to me that "virtue" to Epicurus still means generally "to do what society feels is the excellent/noble thing to do" but for Epicurus we do it because it brings us pleasure, both as the feeling and leading to a more pleasurable life (i.e., [PD05](#)) Virtue has no intrinsic value *other than* to serve as an instrument leading to pleasure. And now pleasure *is* widely defined!

[Cassius](#) : I know you feel strongly about these points you're making, and I can respect that passion. I don't expect to "change your mind." But, I'll admit, after reading my thread from 2020, I seem to be a little pig-headed (Epicurean pun firmly intended) in the opinion I hold.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 5, 2024 at 4:22 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

If those things "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'd have no problem with them. But those *things* don't wash away the fears. They're pleasurable activities, and Epicurus never denies that. But those things alone won't get us down the road to dispelling fears. It seems to me he's saying you have get the fears dispelled first... then you can enjoy various "delights" unencumbered by those fears.

Another point of view, which I may have expressed sometime since 2020, is that it's possible for pleasures of the prodigal to teach us some of these things. I presume that many of us have stories of pursuing excessive pleasures in our youth, only to begin to discover the limits of our pains and desires in the process. Or for them to teach us about death, or our place in the world pertaining to astronomical phenomena (perhaps a stupidly near-death experience, or staring at the night sky while in a state of inebriation).

To me this can be a description of learning by experience and book learning. As psychological hedonists, this is how we learn (sorry, I couldn't resist tossing that out there ☹️). So I don't read this as literally as [Don](#) , but I also don't read it as an endorsement of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. More as a description of the way things are. And with the caveat that I'm limited to reading it in English....

Some (most?) of us, for better or for worse, need to make mistakes before we get to a place where the fears are dispelled and replaced with understanding.

Post by “Cassius” of June 5, 2024 at 7:04 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

There are innumerable "feelings" and emotions within those two categories, but every sensation is either pleasurable or painful. That seems to be a very insightful discovery, and seems to be born out by current psychological affective research... but we're not going down that road

This statement helps clarify the difference in perspective, because i do not see this as a "discovery" at all -- it's not like he "observed" or "put his finger on" some previously overlooked characteristic that is inherent in certain activities that makes them agreeable. He "decided" or "defined" all agreeable things (as determined by mental and bodily feelings / reactions at any moment) would be called "pleasure" (or hedone or voluptas or whatever language) and all disagreeable ones would be called "pain."

Epicurus could have chosen any number of words / divisions that he liked (e.g. he could have called some "noble pleasures" or "worthy pleasures") and so established some kind of arbitrary hierarchy within the term "pleasure." But he instead said (decided / defined) "I need one word to describe all that I feel to be agreeable" and I shall call it "pleasure." i would say that is a "philosophical choice" which makes for a "worldview" rather than a "discovery." Many other people - Cicero and essentially all philosophers besides Epicurus - choose to assign the labeling differently. Rather than calling the standard non-stimulated condition of life by the term

"pleasure," they assess that standard condition differently, and they call it "neutral" or some other in-between word suggesting a less positive assessment.

[Quote from Don](#)

Finally, I don't think Epicurus is necessarily redefining "virtue". It seems to me that "virtue" to Epicurus still means generally "to do what society feels is the excellent/noble thing to do" but for Epicurus we do it because it brings us pleasure, both as the feeling and leading to a more pleasurable life (i.e., [PD05](#)) Virtue has no intrinsic value *other than* to serve as an instrument leading to pleasure. And now pleasure is widely defined!

Now that one I doubt we'll be able to bridge very easily, because I cannot see Epicurus holding a "virtue" (such as wisdom) to be "what society feels is the excellent/noble thing to do." I would think that Epicurus would have deferred to "society" in defining the attributes of "virtue" exactly as much as he deferred to "society" in defining the attributes of a "god."

But yes regardless of where we end up this discussion is extremely helpful toward bringing clarity to the questions!

Post by "Don" of June 5, 2024 at 8:31 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This statement helps clarify the difference in perspective, because i do not see this as a "discovery" at all

Okay, I think I'll agree that "discovery" is maybe not the right word to use in this case. His "discovery" is definitely a reaction against his contemporary philosophical schools' position on that "neutral state." Maybe assertion? Epicurus asserted that "You're all wrong. There is no 'neutral' state. If you all are going to say there's *pleasure*, there's *pain*, and there's some '*neutral*' state between them, I'm not okay with that. When we're alive, we feel pleasure and we feel pain. Period." So, that's why he was constrained in the terms he could use within the philosophical discussions taking place at the time. He could have used different words, but his rivals would just then say "Epicurus is just renaming the neutral state." He had to make a hard break with the rival schools and decided to use the words they used to beat them at their own game, so to speak.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Now that one I doubt we'll be able to bridge very easily, because I cannot see Epicurus holding a "virtue" (such as wisdom) to be "what society feels is the excellent/noble thing to do." I would think that Epicurus would have deferred to "society" in defining the attributes of "virtue" exactly as much as he deferred to "society" in defining the attributes of a "god."

I was just trying to go back to the meaning of virtue/arete/virtus of "[something that shows/exhibits excellence of character; a person or thing's 'full realization of potential or inherent function'](#)." That "society" inclusion was a clumsy way of putting it. The arete of a knife is if it cuts well. The arete of a human is... well, I guess, fill in the blank depending on the situation?

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But yes regardless of where we end up this discussion is extremely helpful toward bringing clarity to the questions!



Post by “Cassius” of June 5, 2024 at 9:53 AM

It is unfortunate that some people are going to see these back-and-forths as uncomfortable or disconcerting but this is the only way we will get to greater clarity.

And more clarify is needed because I think there is a significant number of people who come at Epicurus in a modified-Cicero way.

They understand "pleasure" to mean the equivalent of "sex drugs and rock and roll," and they would like Epicurus to tell them how to experience that feeling all the time.

They understand that there are limits to sex, drugs, and rockandroll specifically, but they hear "pleasure" and they think that Epicurus is going to instruct them in a new experience, hither-to unknown and undiscovered by them, which they will find to be a feeling of stimulation equivalent to sex drugs and rockandroll, but without the "hangover."

So they concentrate on "removing pain" from their life, working toward asceticism, trying to be as "altruistic" and as "good" a person as they can, and they wait and wait for that transcendent moment when in a blinding flash of light they experience this new feeling that does in fact feel as strongly agreeable to them as sex, or drugs, or rockandroll.

Such a moment will never come, but it was never promised.

What was stated instead, is that if you *think* about life correctly (correctly meaning that there are no supernatural gods, platonic "good," or life after death), then you see that "life" allows you to participate in an unlimited number of mental and physical activities which are rewarding in all sorts of ways. With this attitude toward life it is much easier to experience all sorts of agreeable mental and physical activities. You don't have to live under the cloud of thinking that you are being watched by a supernatural god, or that you have to conform to some kind of Platonic ideal, or watch out for punishment or reward after death.

But this attitude toward life and the way you conduct yourself under its influence is *not* in fact the same experience as continuous sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Those who study Epicurus expecting to find that result will get very disappointed and disillusioned. They will fall back into their old habits of looking for magical stimulative fixes that they think might actually allow them to experience those stimulations constantly.

Looking at your hand as feeling pleasure, when the world tells you that your hand is just sitting there doing nothing, does not magically make your hand feel as if it is being massaged. Looking at your hand or your life that way is more of a paradigm shift. The new paradigm allows you to appreciate it when your hand (or life) is healthy, and makes you realize that it is important for you to take proper actions to maintain that health, because when your hand and life are gone, they are gone forever, and they have no experience at all afterwards. You won't consider non-existence to be terrible, because it's not painful, but it is sure as heck is preferable to be alive and experience the pleasures that are possible to the living.

I think if we don't make this clear then we end up talking past each other like Cicero ignoring what Torquatus was saying to him. Worse, we end up wasting a lot of time that we should otherwise devote to living our lives under the certainty that there are no supernatural gods telling us what to do, and that there is no life after death to cause us to worry about reward or punishment. Once we are sure of those things we don't withdraw into our private gardens as if we are fleeing from pain, but we engage prudently with life according to our circumstances and make the most of it.

So I think these discussions are very helpful to clarify these questions.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 5, 2024 at 10:11 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

it's possible for pleasures of the prodigal to teach us some of these things. I presume that many of us have stories of pursuing excessive pleasures in our youth, only to begin to discover the limits of our pains and desires in the process.

This can be true depending on the situation, however in some cases there can be irreparable damage/illness caused to the body by some behaviours -- so we need to heed the wise advice of others or we will suffer the consequences.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 5, 2024 at 11:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But this attitude toward life and the way you conduct yourself under its influence is **not** in fact the same experience as continuous sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Those who study Epicurus expecting to find that result will get very disappointed and disillusioned. They will fall back into their old habits of looking for magical stimulative fixes that they think might actually allow them to experience those stimulations constantly.

PD10: "If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, **and also teach the limits of desires** (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life." (Bailey).

It is natural to enjoy pleasures, however there is something within us which has us coming back for more, over and over again...and...many people have a craving for novelty, which we could label "pleasure as variation".

I sat down to breakfast this morning, eating my humble hard boiled egg, and began reading the special flyer for Trader Joe's:



...from such a scale, we're able to offer each 16-ounce bag for the unbelievable everyday price of \$3.

And since we sell such large quantities of **Almonds**, they don't stay on our shelves before you get them home. What this means for you is that you can always count on them being super fresh. Enjoy **Trader Joe's Raw California Almonds** as a snack, blend them into cakes & cookies, or combined with other nuts & dried fruit to make a personalized trail mix. Whenever you're in need of dependable, delicious, exceptionally affordable almonds, just stop by the **TJ's** nut section.

**Like all California almonds (which means more or less all the almonds produced in the U.S.), our Raw Almonds are not exactly raw; they undergo a steam-bath before being bagged. Since 2007, the USDA has required either fumigation with chemicals or steam pasteurization to ensure food safety. We have chosen the steam pasteurization route in which temperatures reach a high of 165°F. We think this results in the best tasting nuts!*

Putting the Passion Back into Breakfast

Is your morning routine feeling a little... uninspired? Does your plain granola leave you longing for more? Look no further than **Trader Joe's Passion Fruit Granola**! These sweet, tropical-tasting clusters will ignite a brand-new passion for breakfast and set your snacking spirits soaring. You might even say that granola got its groove back—really, you might!

Made from a base of rolled oats and cane sugar, this otherwise simple **Granola** gets its punch and pizzazz from **Passion Fruit** purée and bits of sweet-tart, freeze-dried raspberries. You can munch on these clusters straight out of the bag, or you can enjoy them with milk, in place of your tired breakfast routine. You might

From the flyer: "Putting the Passion Back Into Breakfast - Is your morning routine feeling a little...uninspired? Does your plain granola leave you longing for more?"

For some reason when we indulge our desire for "pleasure as variation" it does not teach us the limits. Instead, we have to think about it and apply reasoning. The desire for "pleasure as variation" has no limit (is endless). This would be one reason why the pleasures of the profligate are considered a "dead-end" (not good). But as for the desire for pleasure as the removal of pain (eating to remove the feeling of hunger) it does have a limit when we pay attention and sense that our stomach is full. An Epicurean enjoys the flavors of the food while also removing the pain of hunger.

VS42: The same span of time embraces both the beginning and the end of the greatest good. Note 42. This is the Norman DeWitt translation from his article "The Summum Bonum Fallacy" in The Classical Weekly, Vol. 44, No. 5 (Dec. 18, 1950), pp. 69-71. The same item is rendered by Epicurus.net as: "The same time produces both the beginning of the greatest good and the dissolution of the evil." Bailey: "The greatest blessing is created and enjoyed at the same moment." (This last paragraph is copied directly from the VS Text section of the forum).

Post by "Kalosyni" of June 5, 2024 at 5:13 PM

This thread may have some over-lapping relevant thoughts (have not yet re-read it):

Thread

[Kungi's Natural and Necessary Discussion](#)

ADMIN NOTE: This thread was split off after Post 10 of the "Welcome Kungi" Thread [here](#). The following series of posts were originally post 11 in that thread.

[...]

This is a prime example of confusing pleasures with desires. *All* pleasures are natural because pleasure/pain is the faculty of feeling. *Desires* are what need to be discussed in terms of what is natural, necessary, vain &c, not pleasures. I imagine this may sound like nitpicking but I'm increasingly convinced that it's an...



Godfrey

July 24, 2022 at 1:35 PM

Also...thinking...

I wonder if it would be okay or not to create these labels:

- "pleasure as removal of pain" (eating and drinking to relieve hunger and thirst)
- "pleasure as variation of sensation" (smelling roses, eating fancy chocolates, etc.)
- "pleasure as homeostasis" (absence of pain, both in body and mind)
- "pleasure as pleasant thinking" (learning, memory, gratitude)

Post by “Little Rocker” of June 6, 2024 at 12:05 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What was stated instead, is that if you *think* about life correctly (correctly meaning that there are no supernatural gods, platonic "good," or life after death), then you see that "life" allows you to participate in an unlimited number of mental and physical activities which are rewarding in all sorts of ways. With this attitude toward life it is much easier to experience all sorts of agreeable mental and physical activities.

I think this is entirely correct, and that's why I think the ascetic interpretation of Epicureanism goes almost as far astray as the 'sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll' interpretation. That's also why, at least if you ask me this morning, I think Epicurus would not be opposed to going to the moon if that's your particular desire. (Maybe that's in part because an hour ago I watched a black wolf chase a deer up a river in the wilderness and thought, for not the first time this week, 'I could get killed doing this' at the same time as I thought, 'this is one of the most amazing things I've ever seen.')

To me, once you believe that pleasure is good and that you shouldn't feel ashamed of enjoying your life, and once you free yourself from the idea that death is the worst thing that can happen, some risks for the most sublime and memorable pleasures of life actually become worth it.

I make this joke sometimes that sort of unnerves my friends, which is that if I die, I can at least say 'I've had a good run.' I tend to think Epicurus thinks we choose our pleasures for ourselves

(within certain constraints, of course), and he's more interested in clearing our heads of the impediments to pursuing and enjoying the pleasures that give us that feeling of living life largely as we please. And the most significant impediments to doing that are shame, fear, ignorance, limitless desires, and superstition. But maybe I've now come too close to the sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll interpretation.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 6, 2024 at 12:52 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

That's also why, at least if you ask me this morning, I think Epicurus would not be opposed to going to the moon if that's your particular desire. (Maybe that's in part because an hour ago I watched a black wolf chase a deer up a river in the wilderness and thought, for not the first time this week, 'I could get killed doing this' at the same time as I thought, 'this is one of the most amazing things I've ever seen.')

Perhaps time to look into wilderness gun use for self-defense against wild animals? (or could you have on hand a stun gun as a last resort?)...just thinking about what kind of options to increase safety amongst wolves and bears.

I was wondering what would happen if something went wrong with a launch on a mission heading to the space station, and it accidentally sent the rocket out past the proper earth orbit sending them out into the solar system...and whether or not they are supplied with a pill to take in a worst case scenario (lost in space). And what would the astronauts ponder in such a situation...would they think well at least this will hopefully build on the future knowledge for the space program (as a benefit for future humanity, so that their death was not in vain) or perhaps they too could say to themselves "I've had a good run".

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I tend to think Epicurus thinks we choose our pleasures for ourselves (within certain constraints, of course), and he's more interested in clearing our heads of the impediments to pursuing and enjoying the pleasures that give us that feeling of living life largely as we please. And the most significant impediments to doing that are shame, fear, ignorance, limitless desires, and superstition. But maybe I've now come too close to the sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll interpretation.

And perhaps everything is referred back to it's over-all affect: do whatever you want if it does not cause you undue physical pain and mental distress (and also keeping to that which is just

and prudent concerning others).

Post by “Don” of June 6, 2024 at 1:34 PM

These scenarios remind me of the Buddhist saying:

If I were to accidentally fall to my death from a great height, it would be a shame to miss the view on the way down.

That seems very Epicurean to me.

Post by “Little Rocker” of June 6, 2024 at 1:44 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

And perhaps everything is referred back to its over-all affect: do whatever you want if it does not cause you undue physical pain and mental distress (and also keeping to that which is just and prudent concerning others).

Yeah, that's the way I think about it--'harmless pleasures' are permitted, when the harm you must avoid concerns others. It seems to me that 'harmless' can include risk and some measure of pain for oneself, so long as it promises or even just might provide an especially exquisite pleasure.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

And what would the astronauts ponder in such a situation...would they think well at least this will hopefully build on the future knowledge for the space program (as a benefit for future humanity, so that their death was not in vain) or perhaps they too could say to themselves "I've had a good run".

I suppose probably both, but I guess the reason I prefer 'I've had a good run' is that you can say it even if everything fails--if nothing is learned, if no one remembers you did it. It's like the pleasure of the activity is enough without success. That sometimes strikes me as one of the coolest things about Epicurus--pleasure isn't required to produce anything to justify itself. And if you think it does have to produce something, then the pleasure might lose a touch of its luster.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Perhaps time to look into wilderness gun use for self-defense against wild animals? (or could you have on hand a stun gun as a last resort?)...just thinking about what kind of options to increase safety amongst wolves and bears.

Ha, yes! I do carry bear spray with me everywhere I go, which is actually more effective than a gun (and a lot lighter than any gun that would take out a bear). That wolf definitely was not interested in me. The most important thing was not getting run over!

Post by “Cassius” of June 6, 2024 at 2:03 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

But maybe I've now come too close to the sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll interpretation.

I suspect the only thing that would possibly hold a time-transported Epicurus back from getting in one of these rockets might be the realization that he is so desperately needed by so many here on earth that he would not want to take the chance of not fulfilling his real "mission." However I would bet that if he thought there were a reasonable chance of coming back to finish his job here, he'd do both 😊

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

undue physical pain and mental distress

Always remembering that "undue" is subjective with the individual person, and not written in stone to be "forced" on everyone except as they themselves make the analysis. Without always including that qualification, what seems like a good idea to the person saying it an easily get changed into a moral imperative for everyone.

Post by “TauPhi” of June 6, 2024 at 7:02 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I was wondering what would happen if something went wrong with a launch on a mission heading to the space station, and it accidentally sent the rocket out past the proper earth orbit sending them out into the solar system.

In that case I wholeheartedly recommend you watch a film called 'Aniara'. It's a brilliant sci-fi film dealing with exactly that problem. It's not an optimistic film, though.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

...and whether or not they are supplied with a pill to take in a worst case scenario (lost in space).

Maybe but I guess talking to each other in a similar fashion would probably be much more satisfying way to deal with a problem like that:

- Hey, Joe. I think we're lost.
- Yeah. You may be right, Matt. Let's open the window to make sure.
- Splendid idea, Joe. It's been a pleasure getting lost with you.
- The pleasure is all mine, Matt.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 6, 2024 at 7:59 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I do carry bear spray with me everywhere I go, which is actually more effective than a gun (and a lot lighter than any gun that would take out a bear).

Oh wow, and oh good!!...and oh thanks because I totally forgot about bear spray, but I need to remember it if I ever go hiking in the wilds (depends on where and if there are bears) no plans currently but I used to hike a lot more back when I lived in Oregon.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 6, 2024 at 9:10 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

pleasure isn't required to produce anything to justify itself. And if you think it does have to produce something, then the pleasure might lose a touch of its luster.

Not only lose some luster, but veer into the realm of virtue/duty ethics!