

Why Do We Consider The Absence of Pain To Be Pleasure?

Post by “Cassius” of November 7, 2024 at 2:16 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

Upon committing to pleasure as the guide to life, it becomes apparent that...

The framing of a [recent post by Julia](#), combined with some other thoughts (the title of the book "Living for Pleasure") has revived today in my mind an old question. I think the discussions in this forum have come a long way in the last year, and I'd like to check on how the people who have been following along (primarily our regulars, but even lurkers if they want to set up an account to participate) react to the following question.

We've discussed it many times before, but now, in the context of many recent discussions in which we've pointed out cites that explain how Epicurus had a much more expansive definition of "pleasure" than most people (in his own time and today) generally apply to that word. So when they read a title like "Living For Pleasure," or "I am committed to pleasure as the guide of my life," many people are legitimately confused.

Almost everyone who is new to Epicurus is going to ask, either out loud or in their own minds:

I certainly know what pleasure is, but I've never thought of pleasure as absence of pain. Why does Epicurus consider the absence of pain to be pleasure?

I'd be very interested in whatever formulations of an answer anyone would like to suggest. I'll come back and add my own after some others have commented, but presume you're talking to a normal person in a normal conversation, and they've just read some generic article on the internet and read that Epicurus considered the absence of pain to be pleasure.

They turn to you in normal conversation and they ask "Why did he do that?"

What do you say in reply?

Post by “Julia” of November 7, 2024 at 2:50 PM

[This article](#) offers a bit of a roundabout answer to your question, especially towards the end; and even though it is about the Cynics, I found the example of their extremes helpful to see my own views more clearly and solidify them. As a matter of fact, it is that article along with [this video](#), which led me to frame my post (the one Cassius linked to) specifically the way I did.

Post by “Cassius” of November 7, 2024 at 3:34 PM

Thanks for the link, but let's practice how we ourselves would answer the question in a couple of sentences in a non-technical-language way. 😊

In other words, I think the answer to this question has to become so second nature to us that we should be easily able to explain it easily and in regular language at the drop of a hat.

And if we can't, then there's a good chance that we really don't have a confident view of what the answer really is.

Post by “Cassius” of November 7, 2024 at 7:15 PM

Remember this from ***On Ends Book Two, 9***, as an example of how clear the equivalence is supposed to be:

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.”

It's supposed to be as true as any proposition can be - so it really should not require an elaborate and obscure explanation.

Post by “Don” of November 7, 2024 at 10:34 PM

Here's my take:

- You are alive.
- As an alive being, you *will* have a reaction to every stimulus that interacts with you. You can't not have a reaction. You can't not *feel* something.
- Those reactions or feelings will be either positive or negative. Positive feelings we call pleasure. Negative feelings we call pain.
- That is why, while we're alive, we feel pleasure or pain. There is no "neutral" feeling.
- Sometimes the pleasure will be slight, sometimes intense. Same with pain. But you're still feeling something.
- So, where there is no pain there is pleasure. And vice versa.
- So The Absence of Pain Is Pleasure; The Absence of Pleasure is Pain.

Post by “Julia” of November 8, 2024 at 3:28 AM

Exactly what Don just said. I completely agree.

Post by “Don” of November 8, 2024 at 5:33 AM

An addendum I'd add to my post #5 above is:

Positive feelings (ie, pleasure) can be categorized as "positive" because they are conducive, favorable, helpful, or beneficial to life or living.

Negative feelings (ie, pain) can be categorized as "negative" because they are unfavorable, unhelpful, detrimental, contrary to, or damaging to life or living.

Negative feelings are inevitable for living, mortal beings and those feelings are valuable by signaling what to avoid or flee from. But we need not embrace or glorify them. And yes, some negative feeling/pain is sometimes necessary for achieving positive feelings/pleasure by one's future self. My go to example is exercise. Those who claim to glorify pain as in "no pain, no gain" are actually saying that they will willingly experience pain but you know what... They leave out the gain, which is taking pleasure in the results of their action!

Post by “Julia” of November 8, 2024 at 6:21 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

But we need not embrace or glorify them. And yes, some negative feeling/pain is sometimes necessary for achieving positive feelings/pleasure by one's future self. My go to example is exercise. Those who claim to glorify pain as in "no pain, no gain" are actually saying that they will willingly experience pain but you know what... They leave out the gain, which is taking pleasure in the results of their action!

I think here it depends quite a bit on one's subjective understanding of what "to embrace" means: In my understanding of the words, I willingly embrace some calculated pain (eg physical exercise), because I keep the results firmly in mind. If I were to reluctantly, grudgingly endure it, I would not be able to maintain the task (and thus forgo its favourable long-term effects).

I don't glorify pain, it is not an end in itself, but I do embrace pain and discomfort, because I know it is not just one, but indeed the only path towards pleasure, which is my goal and guides my selection of which pains to embrace and which to shun (because it either does or doesn't outweighing the pain previously endured to attain it).

In my understanding of "no pain, no gain" to stress this cause-effect relationship as a means to assist the athlete in enduring by firmly holding in mind "Pain now brings gains later!", to help focus on the ends more than the means.

As such, "No pain, no gain" and similar sentences for me are a way to avoid being overly mindful to the present moment (where the work is being done), and to instead help me stay mentally in the space of my goal, where I want to go. It also helps me to remember that (almost always) the more I get done now, the better I will feel later. This is just hedonic calculus; after all, I say: "No pain, no gain." and I do not say: "Whatever the gain, I'm here for the pain!"

This brings to mind three quotes of Epictetus (yes, that guy!), which can easily be distorted (from their historical meanings) to fit Epicurean philosophy:

- "No great thing is created suddenly." → Exercising for 10 seconds won't keep me fit.
- "Say to yourself what you would be; then do what you have to." → I want to keep fit; I won't allow my mind to weasel its way out of it with ludicrous excuses; exercise is not up for debate!
- "The greater the difficulty, the more glory in surmounting it." → The greater the difficulty, the more satisfaction in surmounting it. → Chopping the entire stack of firewood in fall is a massive chore, but the pleasure I will get from this for the next months to come makes it worth it, and knowing I have it done will be very satisfying, so let's not be mindful of the present moment, but instead keep that future pleasure in mind!

I, by virtue of being human, gravitate towards pleasure and comfort naturally; this happens on its own, I don't need to actively maintain it, as it is its own reward; I don't need to embrace it, I merely need to welcome it. However, unless I embrace painful activities), I will run out of pleasures and comforts (I will run out of money, become unhealthy, and neuro-adaptation will make me suffer boredom, depression, and irritability even though I am warm, fed, and safe). To shy away or at best reluctantly engage in them destroys my drive and discipline; to glorify pain displaces pleasure as the proper guide. This is why, to me, to embrace *specific, calculated* pains is simply the correct middle ground, and a means to an end, just like virtue. As a matter of fact, I think it prudent to embrace *these* pains (but certainly not all pain, as in Stoic fatalism).

To sum up my take: Such sentences all serve to avoid mindfulness to the painful present, and serve to hold firmly the in mind the pleasant future.

Post by “Cassius” of November 8, 2024 at 6:23 AM

Yes I think that (post #5) is exactly the right direction! There's a pretty much infinite way to say the same thing in different ways, but the best of them are going to be high-level simple like that.

And it seems to me that it is important to convey that there is a presumption - the "desirability of life" - contained in that first bullet point that ties in to the observation that needs to be second nature and immediately evoke an affirming "Yes" when it is stated. Unfortunately that doesn't seem to be clear to most people in the world today.

Menoceus: And he who counsels the young man to live well, but the old man to make a good end, is foolish, not merely because of the desirability of life, but also because it is the same training which teaches to live well and to die well.

Torquatus In On Ends [30]: Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions.

Post by “Cassius” of November 8, 2024 at 6:33 AM

I crossposted with Julia but have one comment on post 8:

[Quote from Julia](#)

I, by virtue of being human, gravitate towards pleasure and comfort naturally; this happens on its own, I don't need to actively maintain it, as it is its own reward; I don't need to embrace it, I merely need to welcome it

I'm not sure about that last sentence, and taken out of context I suspect it doesn't quite ring right. "I merely need to welcome it" could be read as a kind of muted Stoic-sounding indifference. I think once you put everything in context of how short life is and how you have a limited opportunity to enjoy it, most people are going to see themselves as "pursuing" pleasure, rather than seeing themselves as sort of idly waiting to welcome whatever happens to come along.

In the context of the rest of the post I think there's no problem and it's consistent. The senses tell you the right thing to do by virtue of being human. But I also think some people have a constant temptation to gloss over the point that they need to take action, mental and physical, to live the best life possible to them. The temptation to avoid that realization is an interesting form of corruption.

Again as Torquatus stated it:

Torquatus In On Ends [30]: *Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions.*

Post by “Don” of November 8, 2024 at 6:49 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

because of the desirability of life

As always, I think the original text brings even greater nuance to this. Living is not just desirable, it is to be welcomed! The word used there is:

ἀσπαστός (aspastós) = welcome (whose arrival is a cause of joy), a thing for which to be grateful

PS. It is directly related to the verb ἀσπάζομαι (aspázomai)

- to welcome kindly, bid welcome, greet
- to kiss, embrace, caress
- (of things) to follow eagerly, cleave to
- to be glad that

Possibly related to a verb meaning to draw toward oneself.

Post by “Julia” of November 8, 2024 at 7:44 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"I merely need to welcome it" could be read as a kind of muted Stoic-sounding indifference.

That's not what I say. I don't say "I don't care about the presence or absence of pleasure". I say "I welcome its presence," and I mean that in the same way as Don has just explained perfectly the meaning of "to welcome sth": the arrival of pleasure causes joy, it is a thing I am grateful for, but it is also something I don't need to push myself towards – it happens on its own. I don't need to discipline myself to eat more of my favourite foods, I just need to welcome the joy of them and the eating of them, and the pleasure of the eating of them, that happens practically on its own.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

rather than seeing themselves as sort of idly waiting to welcome whatever happens to come along

That's not quite true for me. Unless I make a concrete mental effort to do just about anything, my Self (as opposed to my body) will remain in thought worlds, and my body (as opposed to my Self) will continue to behave as a piglet would (seeking a soft corner with a heated blanket and comfort food). To do anything at all, I need to first bring the two together. Next, I need to muster the mental power to force my body to move against its drive for immediate gratification, because I know there is more pleasure to be had by [delaying gratification](#). This is to say: Even to shower I *need* to call to mind "I do this now, because I will feel better after!" Unless I did that, unless I would *briefly* acknowledge and then account for the pain involved, unless I would embrace it *for the sake of the reward* that's sure to come, and *quickly* moved my mind *firmly* into the mental space of how I will feel after I have showered, I would not be able to do it. I simply couldn't be bothered, even though I would be filthy. And this is not speculation, this is tried and tested, time and again. My mind would dissociate from the body again,

wondering off into thought, and my body would move itself to a warm corner and wrap itself up in a warm, soft cocoon.

While these mechanics probably start with much smaller actions in me compared to average people, they remain the same no matter what I do. Others who also have a strong ability to dissociate, such as David Goggins, are similar. He is quite clear about that, in his two books, and also in subsequent interviews: He hates running, but he loves what he gains from it on a personal, private level so much that he continues to do it, and he does it by not thinking about running, but by firmly holding in mind what he gets in return, as well as by not engaging in arguments with his own mind, because it will only find excuses, weaken his resolve, make him quit, which will then make him miserable. He idly wasted his life away before that, barely scraping by, over-indulging in junkfood and TV - and I'd be no different; as a matter of fact, I've been there.

I suppose this comes down to a difference in nature and nurture, leading to different dispositions, requiring different remedies on the detailed level, the split-second by split-second level of how to operate one's mind and body, despite the overall goal and guide to life being the same.

Post by “Cassius” of November 8, 2024 at 9:15 AM

This is a good discussion both at the detail and summary level.

As we pursue it I would like to prod, pursue, embrace, welcome, etc others to suggest their own versions of how you'd respond to the question. Don's [post 5](#) is a good example but I am sure everyone has their own preferred way to express the issue simply. It would be helpful to everyone if we come up with as many variations as possible. That will help us see more clearly which versions are most persuasive.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 8, 2024 at 12:41 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Why does Epicurus consider the absence of pain to be pleasure?

When pain is absent from the body, the appreciation of that experience is mentally enjoyable.

And here is a full list of pleasures:

- enjoyable and pleasant bodily sensations (sights, sounds, tastes, touch, smell, etc.)
 - the cessation of pain in the body (when pain is no longer present) (pain = sharp, piercing, burning, stinging, throbbing, heavy)
 - awareness that the body is healthy (no pain present)
 - enjoyable and pleasant mental feelings and thoughts (joy, clarity, calm, strength, gratitude)
 - the cessation of unpleasant emotions (fear, worry, anxiety)
 - awareness of a clear mind free from unpleasant emotions (fear, worry, anxiety)
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Post by “TauPhi” of November 8, 2024 at 8:47 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

I don't glorify pain, it is not an end in itself, but I do embrace pain and discomfort, because I know it is not just one, but indeed the only path towards pleasure, which is my goal and guides my selection of which pains to embrace and which to shun (because it either does or doesn't outweighing the pain previously endured to attain it).

I will try to answer Cassius's initial question by showing that pain is not the only path towards pleasure. [Julia](#) Please don't take what follows as a criticism of your position. I think hedonic calculus is not only subjective but strictly personal and it's everyone's responsibility to make the calculus as efficient for themselves as possible. Whatever works for you, I'm happy for you and it's not my business or intention to criticize. I will just present my position which happen to be different to yours.

Some years ago, I started to realise that it's rather easy to appreciate pleasure when it comes from pain. In other words, when we move from discomfort to comfort, it's rather obvious to most people that this is a good time to feel good. I also started to play with the idea of pleasure as the ever present background to life. The background which is largely neglected by people. It's easy to detect pleasure in a glass of water in the middle of Sahara but awfully difficult to detect pleasure in a glass of water standing at the bottom of crystal clear waterfall with infinite supply of refreshing water at our disposal. The abundance makes people indifferent.

To my understanding, by observing that the absence of pain is pleasure Epicurus removed 'neutral state' for the purpose of tuning people into pleasure that is provided by nature in abundance. In other words, to teach people to feel pleasure when they feel nothing because feeling nothing is missed opportunity due to our misjudgement of reality we find ourselves in.

So my answer to the question: Why Do We Consider The Absence of Pain To Be Pleasure? is this: To gain ability of noticing and thriving in abundance of pleasure available to us instead of neglecting, being overwhelmed, being ashamed and ultimately rejecting pleasure that doesn't come from pain. After all, we are trained to firmly believing that there's no such thing as free lunch, right? Free pleasure must be repulsive. Earn it by suffering or reject it completely. Well, no. Pain is not the only path towards pleasure. It's definitely one of the paths. We cannot avoid pain. It will come whether we like it or not. We should learn from pain how to deal with it and how not to be broken by it, sometimes even how to transform it to pleasure but mostly, we should realise, appreciate and learn how to live our lives unashamedly in pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2024 at 12:29 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

In other words, to teach people to feel pleasure when they feel nothing because feeling nothing is missed opportunity due to our misjudgement of reality we find ourselves in.

I generally agree with Tau Phi's post except perhaps for this sentence wording here. "When they feel nothing" probably ought to be made more clear as something like "when they are not feeling sensually stimulated.". The rejection of a neutral state is probably inconsistent with the flatness of "when they feel nothing." The explicit statement is that you are always feeling one of the two, pleasure or pain, so there is never a time when you flatly "feel nothing" except when you are unconscious.

Post by “Julia” of November 9, 2024 at 4:13 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The rejection of a neutral state is probably inconsistent with the flatness of "when they feel nothing."

Just because there is no neutral state doesn't mean people can't *feel as though* they were in one; what is more: to "feel nothing" is qualitatively different from "feeling to be in a neutral state". I think it is the subjective experience that TauPhi is aiming at, and it is indeed possible to subjectively "feel nothing"; emotionally, physically, or both.

Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2024 at 6:53 AM

[Julia](#)

There is also this fragment to consider incorporating into your wording:

Bailey: LETTERS TO INDIVIDUALS.To Anaxarchus.

23. But I summon you to continuous pleasures and not to vain and empty virtues which have but disturbing hopes of results.

Bryan's Epicurea version has it this way:

[U116] Plutarch, Against Kōlōtēs, 17, p. 1117A: Such is ... the man who, in in the letter to Anaxárhon can pen such words as these: "But I, for my part, summon you to sustained pleasures and not to empty virtues, which fill us with vain expectations that destroy peace of mind."

Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2024 at 12:50 PM

Admin Note: Moved some posts here into a new thread on aspects of Pleasure so we can focus this thread on straightforward short summary answers to the question in the title of the thread. There are definitely many deep directions to go in so as separate tracks develop we can split those off as needed.

Variations, alternatives, etc to Don's suggested response in post #5 above are a main target for this thread.