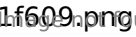


# An Exchange On "Trying Not To Try" and "Hacking" the meaning of "Pleasure"

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2018 at 6:59 PM

The following are excerpts [from a Facebook thread](#). I am posting here for future reference. I have left out some passages that I didn't ask for permission to quote, but the full exchange can be found [in the thread](#).

A Poster: You guys are no fun  ? "The word 'hedonism' itself refers originally to a Greek school of thought, but despite its modern connotations the early Greek hedonists were actually not all that fun. You certainly wouldn't want to party with them. In the early Greek hedonists' view, most of the things - like sex, food, and wine - that are typically viewed as pleasurable by the "vulgar" (that is, you and me) are in fact causes of suffering in the long run. This is because they are by their very nature ephemeral and therefore never genuinely satisfying. The only way to truly maximize pleasure, in the Greek hedonists' view, was to stick to eternal, imperishable pleasures, like philosophical reflection, while keeping one's involvement in the physical world to a bare minimum."

--Edward Slingerland, Trying Not to Try

Cassius:

I TOTALLY disagree with that analysis. No harshness meant, as I see the smiley face, but while I grant you that is majority modern view, I totally disagree that that is proper Epicurean philosophy:



It is observed too that in his treatise On the Ethical End he [Epicurus] writes in these terms:

"I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form."

- Diogenes Laertius, Book X

Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, III.18.41: Why do we shirk the question, Epicurus, and why do we not confess that we mean by pleasure what you habitually say it is, when you have thrown off all sense of shame? Are these your words or not? For instance, in that book which embraces all your teaching (for I shall now play the part of translator, so no one may think I am inventing) you say this: "For my part I find no meaning which I can attach to what is termed good, if I take away from it the pleasures obtained by taste, if I take away the pleasures which come from listening to music, if I take away too the charm derived by the eyes from the sight of figures in movement, or other pleasures by any of the senses in the whole man. Nor indeed is it possible to make such a statement as this - that it is joy of the mind which is alone to be reckoned as a

good; for I understand by a mind in a state of joy, that it is so, when it has the hope of all the pleasures I have named – that is to say the hope that nature will be free to enjoy them without any blending of pain.” And this much he says in the words I have quoted, so that anyone you please may realize what Epicurus understands by pleasure.”

Not posting that to change your or anyone else's mind, but this IS the Epicurean Philosophy group, not the neo-Stoic group, and I for one won't let it go unanswered.   type unknown

- A Reference was made to Seneca stating a similar view, then:

Cassius: EVEN Seneca - you mean ESPECIALLY Seneca, since Seneca as a good Stoic polemicist was going to interpret whatever he could in a way consistent with his own philosophy. There is no hint that Atticus interpreted Epicurus in that way, or that Epicurus himself interpreted it that way in his number of slaves, or the possessions he accumulated and left to others at death, or indeed the exertion he put into launching a full-scale world philosophy. Stoicism and stoic-disposition would have us retreat into our shells and act as if we are worms in ways that Christians would applaud - Epicurus taught pleasure as the goal, and not in a paradoxical way, but in an INTELLIGENT way, which is the precise meaning of [VS63](#) - 63. There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance.

We've been down these debate roads before, and gosh knows I may be the only one to speak up for this interpretation, but that isn't justification to allow the outlook to go unanswered in the Epicurean Philosophy group.

Were Slingerland correct, the Platonic criticism cited here would also be correct - that

**Even at the present day the same objection is raised. For instance, a modern Platonist, ill informed on the true intent of Epicurus, has this to say: "What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by emptying pleasure of all positive content?" <sup>8\*</sup> This ignores the fact that this was but one of the definitions of pleasure offered by Epicurus, that he recognized kinetic as well as static pleasures. It ignores also the fact that Epicurus took personal pleasure in public festivals and encouraged his disciples to attend them and that regular banquets were a part of the ritual of the sect. Neither does it take account of the fact that in the judgment of Epicurus those who feel the least need of luxury enjoy it most and that intervals of abstinence enhance the enjoyment of luxury.<sup>55</sup> Thus the Platonic objector puts upon himself the necessity of denying that the moderation of the rest of the year furnishes additional zest to the enjoyment of the Christmas dinner; he has failed to become aware of the Epicurean zeal for "condensing pleasure."** son cited by

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Then a cite was made to this from the letter to Menoecus: Epicurus also said, "When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of merrymaking, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest disturbances take possession of the soul. Of all this the d is prudence. For this reason prudence is a more precious thing even than the other virtues, for ad a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honor, and justice; nor lead a life of prudence, honor, and justice, which is not also a life of pleasure. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them."

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Cassius: And I don't disagree with you ...c -- God only knows EVERYONE knows that passage if they know anything about Epicurus. But that is only PART of the picture, and I for one do not believe it is helpful to anyone to preach a doctrine of "Trying not to try" in this short and precious lifespan that we have - the only one in which we can experience any pleasure that we are going to get.

I have no clue what JW knows about this issue, or about what anyone else reading this thread knows. I only know that if we have one mission in the group it is to encourage people to make productive use of Epicurean philosophy in their lives. And again, Zeus himself may know of people in this group who are just overwhelming themselves with pleasurable pursuits to the point of creating too much pain for themselves, but my observation is that many of the people coming here are in absolutely OPPOSITE that position.

They are looking around at a world that appears insane, and where there is little sanity to be found, and they are looking for friends and encouragement to make something out of their lives. They don't need the discouragement of telling them that life is all in vain and that they need to content themselves with scraping out what meager happiness they can find out of fear of being overwhelmed by pain.

And at the VERY least, they need to know that that is not what Epicurus taught, and that if he were here he would point to a world of pleasure that is possible, not to asceticism.

Cassius: I have no clue who Slingerman is or what "Trying not to try" is about, other than a quick google that makes it appear that it is focused on eastern techniques of pursuing goals indirectly. That's fine so my comment is not really directed at the book but at the passage quoted. I see this "We've long been told that the way to achieve our goals is through careful

reasoning and conscious effort. But recent research suggests that many aspects of a satisfying life, like happiness and spontaneity, are best pursued indirectly. " which strikes me as non or even anti-Epicurean, but I don't intend to start debating that book - just the recommendation to " stick to eternal, imperishable pleasures, like philosophical reflection, while keeping one's involvement in the physical world to a bare minimum." that is NOT Epicurean.

Cassius: "".... keeping one's involvement in the physical world to a bare minimum."" GOOD GRIEF! 1f609.png ;:-)"

Respondent: Didn't Epicurus say Live Unknown and retreat to a Garden as to minimize persecution and unnecessary pain that comes with political involvement?

Cassius: Er... if you can find ANY context to the quote "live unknown" please let me know. I have looked for that for years and it seems to be quoted with no context whatsoever. Certainly Epicurus advised against certain types of "politics" just as he advised against certain types of romantic love and certain types of all sorts of things. But "political involvement" is a hugely broad term and Epicurus clearly taught self-defense, and living in communities of like-minded people and separating oneself from enemy aliens who cannot be friendly. it would be perverse to argue that he could preach those goals without acknowledging that they have to be implemented as a group activity.

Respondent (continuing in main thread): We are in full agreement about how "pleasure" is woefully misaligned and misunderstood. I think it's important to know that it's not what most people think it is: sensual indulgence off kinds, debauchery, etc. There is also the active pleasures that gobeyond tranquility of mind and freedom from pain in the body. It's a rich and robust doctrine when folks go beyond the misconception. In any case, Slingerland is right about one part of hedonism. His book isn't a treatise on hedonism. I'd suggest reading more than a quote and book title before you criticize it wholesale. Taoism has many affinities with Epicureanism.

Cassius: "No, sensual indulgence IS pleasurable, or else we would not find pleasure in it. The issue is the intelligent balance of long and short term consequences. Were debauchery not productive of pain IN THE LONG RUN, we would have no issue with it, which is the precise teaching of [PD10](#) - 10. "If the things that produce the pleasures of profligate men really freed them from fears of the mind concerning celestial and atmospheric phenomena, the fear of death, and the fear of pain; if, further, they taught them to limit their desires, we should never have any fault to find with such persons, for they would then be filled with pleasures from every source and would never have pain of body or mind, which is what is bad." In fact we would rush to engage in it! 1f609.png "

Cassius: I agree the conversation is useful, but I need to press my point. Pleasure DOES include gluttony, debauchery, and overindulgence -- they ARE pleasurable while we are engaging in them. So we are not carving up pleasure and saying that some things are not REALLY pleasurable, which is what your terminology is saying to me. Debauchery (wild sex, whatever

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The point is important because pleasure is pleasure is pleasure - anything that "feels good" IS pleasurable, just as anything that "feels bad" is painful. The issue is in the consequences, which we have to evaluate so as to choose the long term net result, and not in applying a label - as if there is something INTRINSIC to the activity -- that causes that activity to change in nature.

And that is why at some times the very same activity is painful and other times it is pleasurable. Eating the first two pieces of cake is pleasurable, but the twentieth is (likely) painful.

Cassius: Er.... it is as HUGE issue. If Pleasure can be hacked up, then the knowledge of how to hack it becomes of critical importance. That is the Platonic argument - you MUST have "reason" (the science/knowledge of the hacking process) in order to know what is REAL pleasure and what is FALSE pleasure. That is their argument for the supremacy of "reason." But Epicurus said pleasure is a FEELING not subject to "reason". We know pleasure and pain without the need of reasoning about it. Now reason is extremely helpful in predicting the consequences in the future (based on past experience) but the issue comes down to WHERE does nature provide the guidance - and it is in the FEELING , which cannot be second-guessed by reason, to which we have to look as the only guide nature gave us. We're compressing a lot here, but it's a huge issue to keep in mind and thank you for discussing it!

Cassius: It is very difficult for me (not being a professional philosopher) to cite quickly the arguments in [Philebus](#) and elsewhere that make this point, but the issue expands this way as I read it: Once you acknowledge that "reason" is necessary to know "true" pleasure from "false" pleasure then you have to acknowledge that reason is more important than pleasure. And although it never sounded very persuasive to me, the argument quickly proceeds (by hacking) to the conclusion that if reason/wisdom is the really important thing, then you really don't need "pleasure" at all -- and that leads to the elimination of pleasure and directly to the conclusion that we must "stick to eternal, imperishable pleasures, like philosophical reflection, while keeping one's involvement in the physical world to a bare minimum" which is the phrase that set me off in the first place 1f609.png 😊

Cassius: Of course we really haven't yet reached the more controversial aspect: Does "absence of pain" mean something DIFFERENT than "pleasure" as that word is ordinarily understood - as the "feeling" we all call pleasure?

The ascetic disposition that wants to hack "pleasure" into "true pleasure" and "false pleasure" and let reason be arbiter also wants to totally redefine "pleasure" into solely mental or static pleasure, while denying that bodily/stimulating pleasures are really pleasure at all. The

questions tend to get mixed together, but I do think they are separate. We've at the end here been debating (1) whether activities that people think are pleasurable (debauchery) can be hacked into "real pleasure" and "false pleasure." The more intellectually aggressive (and prevailing) argument is to say (2) that there is a HIGHEST pleasure, which is different in kind and superior to the "lower" pleasures. This argument pleads that "absence of pain" may sound difficult-to-define and esoteric and counterintuitive, but that Epicurus taught that THIS "highest" pleasure is the goal toward which we all should aim, pushing aside the "lower" pleasures and focusing to the extent of our power on this "highest pleasure" which can be defined only as "absence of pain."

But the real battleground remains: (1) Is "pleasure" something that we feel? (in which case ALL pleasure of ALL types - mental and physical - is pleasurable and desirable, so long as we feel it to be so), or (2) Is "the highest pleasure" something that we don't "feel" at all (in which case we back into it by eliminating pain, such that at the moment the last ounce of pain is suppressed then - VIOLA! - we have reached this new highest state which has nothing to do with the mundane lower animal pleasures)! And don't be surprised - the only attempt at definition anyone really gives this "absence of pain" state sounds amazingly like "philosophical reflection, while keeping one's involvement in the physical world to a bare minimum."

The alternative that explains BOTH option (1) (ALL pleasurable feelings are pleasure and desirable), while also making it understandable why Epicurus talked about (2) "absence of pain" is to consider "absence of pain" as referenced in PD3 - as a measure of QUANTITY ONLY. Which is simply to say that when we have filled our experience with ordinary pleasures to the point where our experience is "full," there is no room left for pain - pain is "absent." Thus "absence of pain" is only a measure of quantity which states that we are full of ordinary pleasure, not a description of something different. "Absence of pain" in this perspective is nothing more than saying that our experience at that moment is of complete and pure sum of ordinary mental and physical pleasures.

See "ON ENDS" - "The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?"

Cassius: The first part of this reference from Plutarch comes VERY close to explicitly stating the "quantity" argument I am making: Plutarch, That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible, 3, p. 1088C: \*\*Epicurus has imposed a limit on pleasures that applies to all of them alike: the removal of all pain. For he believes that our nature adds to pleasure only up to the point where pain is abolished and does not allow it any further increase in magnitude (although the pleasure, when the state of painlessness is reached, admits of certain unessential variations). But to proceed to this point, accompanied by desire, is our stint of pleasure, and the journey is indeed short and quick. Hence it is that becoming aware of the poverty here they

transfer their final good from the body, as from an unproductive piece of land, to the soul, persuaded that there they will find pastures and meadows lush with pleasure." (Cite comes from here: <https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3...Td7fqXKUR4cpZDV>)

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