

"Pleasure" vs "Pleasant Experiences"

Post by "Kalosyni" of February 4, 2025 at 7:34 AM

This excerpt from the Letter to Menoecus got me thinking...

"For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."

We need to pay attention to how we hear and understand words. If we say "Pleasure is the goal of life" it ends up leading to a skewed understanding of Epicurean philosophy, by putting too much emphasis on food/drink/sex...and because there are those people who function that way even now in our current times.

So my idea is saying this instead: "Pleasant experiences are the goal of life" which can still include enjoyment of food, etc. and has a more grounded feeling (and includes prudence) compared to "pleasure is the goal of life" which has a "swinging from the chandeliers" connotation (or the sex/drugs/rock-n-roll").

"Pleasure is the goal of life"

-----VS-----

"Pleasant experiences are the goal of life"

Post by "Cassius" of February 4, 2025 at 8:08 AM

In the right context that's not a bad idea, but the end I don't see a way around explaining what Pleasure means in full, which is more than just sensual stimulation.

Referencing "pleasant experiences" may take some of the edge off for people who are suspicious of the word pleasure, but that may not be a good idea. In most cases we probably shouldn't be trying to accommodate people with wrong ideas, we should be trying to educate them as to why they are wrong and that there is a better way of understanding pleasure.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 4, 2025 at 8:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't see a way around explaining what Pleasure means in full, which is more than just sensual stimulation.

I firmly believe that Epicurean philosophy should be easily explained without having to re-define a common word.

In English the word "pleasure" currently has a specific meaning. And to the average person who has not studied the philosophy, it ends up conveying an idea that Epicureans just are just out to have a good time, and it very much is first understood as sensual stimulation or sensual gratification.

We use a different word for mental pleasure - it's called "enjoyment". And I feel like the phrase "pleasant experiences" encompasses both physical and mental pleasure.

Also, what is left out of "pleasure" is the use of reason to banish wrong opinions about the nature of life, the soul, death, etc.

So a goal could be to state all of that (enjoyment, prudence, and reason) in one succinct sentence.

Post by “Don” of February 4, 2025 at 9:30 AM

I have thoughts on the word "goal" for τέλος ... But that'll have to wait until this evening.

Post by “Cassius” of February 4, 2025 at 10:31 AM

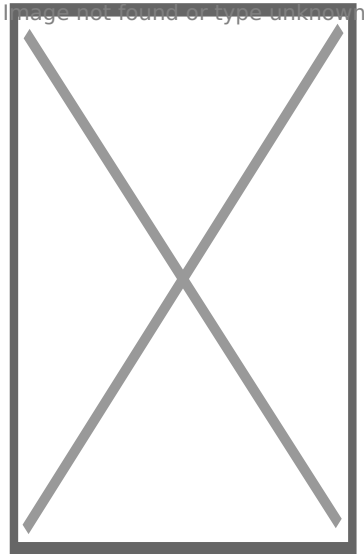
[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I firmly believe that Epicurean philosophy should be easily explained without having to re-define a common word.

And you're on exactly the same page as Cicero, and you'll want to do more reading from Torquatus and decide whether Cicero's position or Torquatus' makes the most sense! 😊

this is Plato's *Timaeus*. But Epicurus, in my opinion, has no intention of not speaking plainly and clearly if he can, nor is he discussing a recondite subject like natural philosophy, nor a technical subject such as mathematics, but a lucid and easy topic, and one that is generally familiar already. And yet you Epicureans do not deny that we understand what pleasure is, but what he means by it; which proves
Q5

not that we do not understand the real meaning of the word, but that Epicurus is speaking an idiom of his own and ignoring our **accepted terminology**. For if he means the same as Hieronymus, who holds that the Chief Good is a life entirely devoid of trouble, why does he insist on using the term pleasure, and not rather 'freedom from pain,' as does Hieronymus, who understands his own meaning? Whereas if his view is that the End must include kinetic pleasure (for so he describes this vivid sort of pleasure, calling it 'kinetic' in contrast with the pleasure of freedom from pain, which is 'static' pleasure), what is he really aiming at? For he cannot possibly convince any person who *knows himself*^a—anyone who has studied his own nature and sensations—that freedom from pain is the same thing as pleasure. To identify them, Torquatus, is to do violence to the senses; it is uprooting from our minds the knowledge of the meaning of words imbedded in them. Who is not aware that the world of experience contains these three states of feeling: first, the enjoyment of pleasure; second, the sensation of pain; and third, which is my own condition and doubtless also yours at the present moment, the absence of both pleasure and pain? Pleasure is the feeling of a man eating a good dinner, pain that of one being broken on the rack; but do you really not see that intermediate between those two extremes lies a vast multitude of persons who are feeling neither gratification nor pain?" "I certainly do not," said he; "I maintain that all who are without pain are enjoying pleasure, and what is more the highest form of pleasure." "Then you think that a man



[Cicero, Marcus Tullius, On Ends - De Finibus Bonorum Et Malorum : Cicero : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Cicero - De Finibus - translated by H. Rackham
archive.org

Post by “Bryan” of February 4, 2025 at 11:51 AM

Cicero was certainly correct that the *Timaeus* is obscure—and I agree that the reader of Plato develops a sympathy for this obscurity, as Plato does seem to sincerely wish to be as clear as possible. In fact, the *Timaeus* is really the same geometric explanation repeated three different times, gradually introducing the complexity.

This sort of 'clarity through repetition' or 'clarity through saying your point in different ways' seems to be something that Epíkouros also employs in *On Nature*.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 4, 2025 at 11:56 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I have thoughts on the word "goal" for τέλος ... But that'll have to wait until this evening

Just to flesh out a bit more about the "goal": "What does an Epicurean focus on doing?"

Because either you are 1) choosing for yourself and being intentional; or 2) you are just going along with what other people around you are doing (i.e. letting them choose for you or going along with their random whims); or 3) giving in to your own random whims and urges.

So if you are choosing your actions with intention, you need to know how much importance to put onto each option that comes your way.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 4, 2025 at 10:11 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."

[Kalosyni](#) , as I was reading your original post above, I thought that I was following your line of thought, but then my conclusion was the opposite of yours.... In this context I read it as an indictment of Cyrenaic pursuit of pleasure and a description of the fullness of Epicurean pleasure. Sober reasoning, etc, as the cake, and drinkings, etc, as the icing.

Or sober reasoning and such leading to katastematic pleasures, drinkings and such leading to kinetic pleasures. As it were.

Post by “Don” of February 4, 2025 at 11:30 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I have thoughts on the word "goal" for τέλος ... But that'll have to wait until this evening.

Okay, so what was I alluding to?

ΤΕΛΟΣ (telos) is often - predominantly - translated into the English as "goal," sometimes "end." This implies what comes at the *finish* of a race or *end* of a game or "winning if you reach the goal." That's an unfortunate side effect of working with the English word "goal." Think of a football/soccer match and the announcer yelling "GOOOOOAAAAL!"

My thought is that ΤΕΛΟΣ (*and I'm purposefully using the Greek spelling to remove it from contamination of English semantics*) should NOT be taken as a "goal" to be achieved but rather as a fact to be acknowledged. Let me provide a link to the dictionary here to start:

<https://logeion.uchicago.edu/%CF%84%CE%AD%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%82>

While ΤΕΛΟΣ does have, within its dictionary definitions, English words like "achievement, attainment; winning-post, goal"; the connotation I want to focus on is "Philos., full realization, highest point. ideal; ... the end or purpose of action: hence, the final cause: hence simply = τὸ ἀγαθόν, the chief good."

When Epikouros writes to Menoikeus to say "καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τῆν ἡδονὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος λέγομεν εἶναι τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν" I maintain it is NOT something like "pleasure is the start ἀρχὴν and finish τέλος of the blessed life." The blessed life is enveloped by pleasure, it is the foundation and the fulfillment of the blessed life but we need to acknowledge that and live our life that way. The blessed life - a life akin to the gods - is a life where all one's actions are pointing toward pleasure. When we ask the question "Why do I do that?" the answer is always "for pleasure". If I undergo a painful trial to have a better life on the other side, the reason I went through that pain is pleasure. Pleasure imbues EVERYTHING we do. If we try to substitute another answer to "Why do I do that?" we are fooling ourselves. Pleasure is not a "winning-post" to be reached, something we have to strive for or agonize about not having or something to swim against the tide to achieve. Pleasure is present - sometimes slightly, sometimes intensely - in every moment of the day in everything we do. If we see Pleasure as something "out there" that we have to achieve, we're missing out.

"Goal" is an insufficient way to express the omnipresence of Pleasure. "Pleasure is the goal" is a pale way of saying - as I consider it more - "Pleasure is the reason I do everything." Pleasure is the final cause for all my actions. That kind of "final goal" is what is meant by "Pleasure is the goal." It's NOT "Pleasure is the GOAL" it is rather "Pleasure **IS** the goal."

We ONLY experience two feelings: Pleasure or Pain. If Cicero wants to go all apoplectic on what he considers an idiosyncratic use of "voluptas" or ἡδονη, boohoo Cicero. It seems to me to be Epicurus calling reality as he sees it.

Pleasure exists as the omnipresent end-point of all our actions. We don't have to run the race to achieve pleasure. It is here, now, in every decision, every action, IF we're willing to admit that that is - in every moment - the final cause of all our actions.

That's what I'm beginning to understand "Pleasure is the goal" to mean.

Post by “Bryan” of February 5, 2025 at 12:30 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

"Pleasure is the reason I do everything."

Yes, I fully agree. Our pleasure should be our continuous guide. We have pleasure, but we need to act in a way that ensures we continue to have it.

I think of pleasure as something like a compass. The boat is afloat, and it is a pleasure to be sailing: but we are always traveling through the seas of time, and we must steer in a coherent direction—or else risk sailing into storms or crashing against reefs.

Many people have goals beyond their own pleasure — *some* give too much of themselves, *others* take too much for themselves, *while almost all seek unnecessary change of some sort* — and this leads them into many unpleasant and unnecessary circumstances!

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 5, 2025 at 8:54 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Pleasure exists as the omnipresent end-point of all our actions. We don't have to run the race to achieve pleasure. It is here, now, in every decision, every action, IF we're willing to admit that that is - in every moment - the final cause of all our actions.

[Don](#) it sounds like you are saying that the telos is the same as saying: "[pleasure is the guide of life](#)". (?)

Which then is very similar to saying: When the sky is clear it is blue - basically, an observation.

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Many people have goals beyond their own pleasure — some give too much of themselves, others take too much for themselves, while almost all seek unnecessary change of some sort — and this leads them into many unpleasant and unnecessary circumstances!

[Bryan](#) it sounds like you are saying duty to "virtue" sometimes overrides pleasure as a guide of life. (?)

And what you said about: "while almost all seek unnecessary change of some sort — and this leads them into many unpleasant and unnecessary circumstances" - this may be worth a new thread discussion, to explore (if you have more to say?)

What comes up for me now is that we really ought to be saying that both pain and pleasure are the guides of life. Because if you watch yourself during an entire day, how much of the time are you motivated by the desire to remove pain?

Of course the next thing that would be said is: "pleasure is the removal of pain". But this is doing word gymnastics (redefining words). If I go outside to pick some camellia flowers and put them in a vase and put them on my dining table, then this is done for pure pleasure. But if I drink water because I feel thirsty and it relieves my thirst, then I am motivated by the removal of pain.

Post by “Don” of February 5, 2025 at 11:09 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I am motivated by the removal of pain.

Or you are motivated by the need to move toward pleasure.

PS. I'm thinking some of this is a matter of perspective and not just linguistic trickery.

Post by “Don” of February 5, 2025 at 3:00 PM

Consider a light house.

The lighthouse is always there. We steer our little boat towards the lighthouse. We steer away from the rocks and shoals by the beacon of the lighthouse. We choose to keep going through storms and rocks to get to safety. We don't sit out the storm, unless we're too far out to see when we have to heave to.

That's a draft metaphor. Thoughts welcomed.

Post by “Cassius” of February 5, 2025 at 5:26 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

PS. I'm thinking some of this is a matter of perspective and not just linguistic trickery.

I think this is what people are wrestling with mostly unsuccessfully. If you take the position that pleasure has to be stimulative (which means you accept Cicero's and Plato's and the other major philosophers' perspective) then you are going to think Epicurus is engaged in linguistic trickery.

If you take Epicurus' perspective that the purpose of life is not to fulfill some divine plan, but simply to live your life as happily as you can, then you can more easily see that being healthy and alive at all deserves to be considered pleasure, and you don't feel tricked by the fact that Epicurus doesn't promise you constant physical stimulation. A lot of people seem to think that Epicurus is saying that he's going to deliver them paradise through some kind of trick that the Stoics and Buddhists haven't thought of. (*Hmmmm yees - now I feel it - absence of pain really IS a great stimulant - feels kind of like marijuana - give me some more!!!*)

Epicurus' viewpoint is a lot closer to choosing to see the glass of life as half-full, rather than half-empty, than it is to any kind of Buddhist or Stoic mind games.

In fact, I am not sure I should say it's "close" to that. It's exactly what it is -- learning through philosophy to see that life is pleasurable in all its aspects unless you are specifically experiencing some specific pain in some part of your experience. If you are experiencing some specific pains, then to the extent you can, you should try to minimize that pain, but not at the expense of giving up the majority of pleasures that you've successfully won and which continue to be available to you at reasonable cost.

"The wise man always has more reason for joy than for vexation." --->

For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but

awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.

- *Torquatus - Cicero, On Ends 1:62*

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 6, 2025 at 8:13 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The lighthouse is always there. We steer our little boat towards the lighthouse. We steer away from the rocks and shoals by the beacon of the lighthouse. We choose to keep going through storms and rocks to get to safety. We don't sit out the storm, unless we're too far out to see when we have to heave to.

How does pain, pleasure, homeostatis, satisfaction in the feeling of being alive (Chrysippus' hand), doing what needs to be done for good longterm outcomes, etc. fit into this metaphor?

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 6, 2025 at 8:18 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"The wise man always has more reason for joy than for vexation."

You could almost use this as an additional "criteria" when you ask yourself: What will happen to me if I get what I want and what will happen if I do not get what I want. (paraphrase of [VS71](#))

Post by “Cassius” of February 6, 2025 at 8:36 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

fit into this metaphor

Good question but I bet Don can do it.

Post by “Don” of February 6, 2025 at 1:24 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

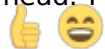
The lighthouse is always there. We steer our little boat towards the lighthouse. We steer away from the rocks and shoals by the beacon of the lighthouse. We choose to keep going through storms and rocks to get to safety. We don't sit out the storm, unless we're too far out to see when we have to heave to.

How does pain, pleasure, homeostatis, satisfaction in the feeling of being alive (Chrysippus' hand), doing what needs to be done for good longterm outcomes, etc. fit into this metaphor?

Pain is represented by the storms, hidden reefs, submerged rocks, pirates(!), and other hazards as we keep our eyes on the lighthouse.

Pleasure, that to which all else points, is represented by the lighthouse, the highest point around, symbolizing safety, satisfaction, security, refuge, harbor, etc.

For now, I'm not going to shoehorn the other aspects into this metaphor. A metaphor can on encompass so much before you need another metaphor. And this is all iterally off the top of my head. I am in no way attached to it. If others find it helpful or want to build on it or discard it,



Post by “Cassius” of February 6, 2025 at 1:37 PM

One aspect of the metaphor is that a lighthouse is clearly man-made, and the guidance we're looking to is something completely natural, more like a "north star" maybe. But metaphors are always approximate. Pointing out deficiencies in them is half the fun.

Post by “Joshua” of February 6, 2025 at 1:54 PM

Quote from Usener Fragment 67

"For I at least do not even know what I should conceive the good to be, if I eliminate the pleasures of taste, and eliminate the pleasures of sex, and eliminate the pleasures of listening, and eliminate the pleasant motions caused in our vision by a visible form."

Whenever we discuss the Letter to Menoikeus, I feel it's important to contrast it with what Epicurus wrote in the above surviving fragment from a lost work *Peri Telos*, "On the End". For this and other reasons, I am unwilling to cede the word *pleasure* to the naysayers. We lose far more than we stand to gain. Lucretius sets the tone for me: *dux vitae dia voluptas*; Divine Pleasure, the guide of life.

If people hear 'pleasure' and think 'bodily pleasure', I do not regard that as a problem - mainly because I think those people are probably motivated to this misinterpretation by religion or politics or culture or upbringing, and they would reject Epicureanism no matter how thoroughly it was explained to them.

Post by “Don” of February 6, 2025 at 2:36 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

One aspect of the metaphor is that a lighthouse is clearly man-made, and the guidance we're looking to is something completely natural, more like a "north star" maybe.

I like the North Star idea. That could still work. I'll admit I like the sailing metaphor in our little boat.

Storms can also obscure the North Star, but it remains and becomes visible again once the storm of pain passes.

Post by “Cassius” of February 6, 2025 at 2:47 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

If people hear 'pleasure' and think 'bodily pleasure', I do not regard that as a problem - mainly because I think those people are probably motivated to this misinterpretation by religion or politics or culture or upbringing, and they would reject Epicureanism no matter how thoroughly it was explained to them.

Yep -- they are not completely wrong at all -- they are just only partly right.

And what I read you to be saying is that we have to realize that this issue is not just difference of opinion as to words. In fact, those who try to water down Epicurus to please his enemies may well be making the much worse mistake.

If you were ever to succeed in making people who are suspicious of pleasure really understand what Epicurus was saying, you should not expect them to say "Oh, I get it, that's neat - let's go have a party!"

They are more likely to say "*Now I see what you're doing! What you're doing would totally replace [insert name of preferred God or Virtue here]! Now that I understand you, I see that there's no coming to an agreement with you. Get out of my life and my city -- It's time for war, heathen!*"

And unfortunately a lot of ancient Epicureans probably experienced exactly that result. Had Plutarch and the earliest church fathers had the power to eliminate the Epicureans by force, rather than just writing books against them, they might well have done that. And at least one of the religious holidays that exists today (I'm thinking Hanukkah) [celebrates something very close to that](#) (see the section *Epicureanism and the Judeans*).

So just like the Epicurean mentioned in Alexander the Oracle monger, we need to be careful in deciding who is open to discussion and how to talk with them.

As I have said, Alexander was much afraid of Epicurus, and the solvent action of his logic on imposture.

[Quote from Lucian - Alexander the Oracle Monger](#)

On one occasion, indeed, an Epicurean got himself into great trouble by daring to expose him before a great gathering. He came up and addressed him in a loud voice.

'Alexander, it was you who induced So-and-so the Paphlagonian to bring his slaves before the governor of Galatia, charged with the murder of his son who was being educated in Alexandria. Well, the young man is alive, and has come back, to find that the slaves had been cast to the beasts by your machinations.'

What had happened was this. The lad had sailed up the Nile, gone on to a Red Sea port, found a vessel starting for India, and been persuaded to make the voyage. He being long overdue, the unfortunate slaves supposed that he had either perished in the Nile or fallen a victim to some of the pirates who infested it at that time; so they came home to report his disappearance. Then followed the oracle, the sentence, and finally the young man's return with the story of his absence.

All this the Epicurean recounted. Alexander was much annoyed by the exposure, and could not stomach so well deserved an affront. He directed the company to stone the man, on pain of being involved in his impiety and called Epicureans. However, when they set to work, a distinguished Pontic called Demostratus, who was staying there, rescued him by interposing his own body. The man had the narrowest possible escape from being stoned to death—as he richly deserved to be; what business had he to be the only sane man in a crowd of madmen, and needlessly make himself the butt of Paphlagonian infatuation?