

Pleasure as a guide

Post by “EyalA” of March 3, 2025 at 2:02 PM

In recent podcasts i've heard Nietzsche's name mentioned here and there. As someone who is also taking interest in Nietzsche, i wanted to clarify for myself some distinctions between Nietzsche and Epicurus, and answer the question why i prefer the latter.

So i engaged in a chat with chat gpt which i found interesting -

Epicure views pleasure as the guide for the good life. Does Nietzsche has an equivalent to that.

Yes, Nietzsche has an equivalent, but it's quite different from Epicurus' idea of pleasure. While Epicurus sees pleasure (understood as the absence of pain and a state of tranquility) as the highest good, Nietzsche focuses on the will to power as the guiding principle of a flourishing life.

For Nietzsche, the good life isn't about seeking comfort or avoiding suffering, but about embracing struggle, overcoming, and self-transformation. He sees pain and hardship as necessary for growth, as they lead to the development of strength and greatness. Instead of avoiding suffering (as Epicurus advises), Nietzsche suggests that we should affirm life in all its aspects—joy and suffering alike—because overcoming challenges is what makes life meaningful.

So, while Epicurus says “seek pleasure and avoid pain,” Nietzsche might say “seek power, embrace struggle, and create your own values.”

I was not satisfied so i said: This sounds misleading. Some pleasures are obvious, and others demand integrating memory and thinking.

Yet seek power does not sound clear. Struggle might be ok for an epicurean as long as it is within the pleasure calculation.

To which he replied:

You're right to push back on that. Nietzsche's concept of the will to power isn't as straightforward as Epicurus' pleasure principle, and reducing it to “seek power” can be misleading. Let's refine this.

Nietzsche isn't just talking about political or social dominance but rather a deep, internal drive toward self-overcoming and creative expression. It's about expanding one's abilities, transforming oneself, and shaping the world according to one's own values.

Epicurus emphasizes pleasure, but not in a simple hedonistic way—it involves intellectual reflection and memory to discern which pleasures are truly worth pursuing. Similarly, Nietzsche's will to power isn't just about raw struggle; it includes art, philosophy, personal growth, and the joy of creating.

An Epicurean might accept struggle if it leads to greater pleasure and less suffering in the long run, while Nietzsche would say struggle itself is inherently valuable—not just as a means to an end, but as the process that defines a flourishing life. The good life for Nietzsche is an active, self-affirming existence where one embraces even suffering as part of the grand play of life.

Would you say this is closer to the nuance you're looking for?

And then we continued:

Yes. Much better. Is it fair to say that for Nietzsche the advice is "always seek for struggle so to improve yourself",

While for Epicurus, "look for struggle only if you calculate it will lead to a better state"?

Yes, that's a fair way to frame it.

For **Nietzsche**, struggle isn't just a means to an end—it's an essential part of growth and self-overcoming. His advice would be something like: "**Embrace struggle because it makes you stronger, more creative, and more alive.**" Even suffering should be affirmed, because it plays a role in shaping greatness. The goal isn't comfort but **becoming more**—pushing past limits, creating new values, and fully expressing one's potential.

For **Epicurus**, on the other hand, struggle is **only worth it if it leads to a better state**—meaning greater pleasure and less pain in the long run. He wouldn't reject struggle outright, but he'd say, "**Only take on challenges if reason shows they will bring lasting tranquility.**" If a struggle leads to unnecessary pain with no real benefit, it should be avoided.

So Nietzsche sees struggle as inherently valuable, while Epicurus sees it as a strategic choice. That contrast captures the essence of their difference.

This led us to a further discussion about struggle, but I'll stop here for the moment since I am probably over extending.

Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2025 at 2:38 PM

Thank you for the post EyalA - there are a number of us here who like Nietzsche, including me.

Also, I just posted a "Welcome" thread for you. Please introduce yourself over there in that thread.

As to Nietzsche, you're probably aware of N's anti-stoic views, and his sometimes good things to say about Epicurus, as in Antichrist, so it's a complex subject.

I admire a lot of what Nietzsche had to say, but in my view he was wrong to ultimately dismiss Epicurus on what we might call "absence of pain" grounds. If I thought that Epicurus was guilty of what Nietzsche apparently considered him to be guilty of, I too would never have stayed with Epicurus. Obviously Nietzsche was a brilliant guy, and no doubt smarter than me by a lot, but I don't think he worked as hard as he should have to pursue the wider meaning of 'pleasure' in the Epicurean worldview. It's in doing that where I think that N. and Epicurus can be reconciled and brought into much closer harmony than the initial chatgpt response would indicate.

Glad to have you with us, as I think an appreciation of Nietzsche goes a long way toward appreciating Epicurus' "this-worldly" focus.

Post by “EyalA” of March 3, 2025 at 3:32 PM

I will summarize the continuation, since it's relevant to your points.

Obviously I pushed from the Epicurean side, but I think the conclusion is fair.

How would Nietzsche react to a fairly calculated Epicurean rejection of a certain course

Ultimately, Nietzsche would challenge an Epicurean to ask: “Are you rejecting this path because it truly leads to a lesser life, or because you are avoiding discomfort and risk?” If it's the latter, he'd see it as a failure to fully affirm life.

I guess an Epicurean could reply that these factors are legitimate and necessary. They are based on self knowledge, and also - all pleasures are good. For him given that he elaborated, his decision is well based.

Yes, an Epicurean could push back with a strong argument. They might say:

1..

2..

3. Pleasure isn't passive - Epicureanism isn't just about simple, bodily pleasures but also includes intellectual and creative joys. If a person carefully crafts their life around meaningful pleasures, that's a sign of wisdom, not mediocrity.

Essentially, the Epicurean would argue that **selective rejection of struggle isn't life-denying but life-enhancing**. The key difference is that Nietzsche sees **the act of struggling itself** as inherently valuable, while Epicurus sees struggle as **a tool to be used wisely, only when it serves greater happiness**.

Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2025 at 3:40 PM

[Quote from EyalA](#)

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Yes i think that's correct, and epicurus would say that it's wrong to put the cart before the horse by elevating the means to the end.

I would say Epicurus is being more consistent by defining happiness as the goal and remaining consistent that all tools are subservient to the goal.

Where we won't find much help from Nietzsche or Epicurus' detractors, and where we have to look to the Epicurean texts, is in seeing that pleasure and happiness are in no way an equivalent to passivity and inaction, as Epicurus' detractors claim. Cassius Longinus and Torquatus and other Epicureans of Cicero's period (and I cite those only because we have the best records of them) would have labored under no illusion that Epicurean philosophy is necessarily "soft." Epicurean philosophy has always been recognized as morally revolutionary, and "soft" people don't launch revolutions - they go along to get along.