

The “Absence of Pain” Problem

Post by “Rolf” of April 14, 2025 at 3:32 PM

Hey folks!

I reached out to Cassius recently asking about the “absence of pain” problem. I’m fairly new to both this forum and epicurean philosophy as a whole, so I wasn’t sure about posting publicly, but Cassius kindly welcomed me to do so, so here goes!

Everything I’ve read on Epicureanism so far has been fairly easy to grasp and smooth sailing. However, the description of pleasure as the “absence of pain” in certain passages really threw me off. Little did I know that this was actually a common topic of debate.

After some digging (and reading lots of threads on EpicureanFriends!), I’ve come to the following understanding. That said, this is something I’d very much like to dive into deeper.

As illustrated by the cup analogy, the absence of pain is necessarily the greatest quantity of pleasure possible, since 100% pleasure indicates 0% pain in the cup. Therefore, when Epicurus talks about pleasure being the absence of pain in Menoeceus, he is saying that the end goal, the *ideal* to strive for in Epicureanism is NOT the pleasure of the “prodigal” (who spends money recklessly without concern for long-term pleasure) nor the pleasures of sensuality (imprudent pleasures, such as those endorsed by the Cyrenaics), but complete pleasure, free of pain. The term “absence of pain” here is used to emphasise the contrast between the epicurean view of pleasure and other, less prudent views of pleasure that often cause more pain.

This is further supported by the preceding text, where Epicurus talks about how habituating oneself to a simple diet is good because it makes luxuries more enjoyable when they come up. If he really meant that the goal was an ascetic, zombie-like state of painlessness, it would make no sense for him to talk about the enjoyment of luxuries right before.

As for PD3, I echo Cassius’ thoughts on it being a response to the contemporary views on the viability of pleasure as the goal of life (ie. The limited quantity).

Post by “Don” of April 14, 2025 at 5:32 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If he really meant that the goal was an ascetic, zombie-like state of painlessness, it would make no sense for him to talk about the enjoyment of luxuries right before.

Well stated!

Post by “Cassius” of April 14, 2025 at 5:38 PM

Another thing I'd add is that the cup analogy is just that - an "analogy" - as would be the ideal of all experience being pleasure. I think there's a tendency for us all to be thinking in terms of "explain to me exactly what I must do to enter the kingdom of heaven." In other words, give me the exact prescription for paradise, and I'll follow exactly those steps so that I - and everyone else who drinks the medicine - will experience exactly the same thing. With the idea being that there is some precise experience - setting foot in heaven or experiencing exactly the same euphoria of a magic potion - that is being talked about.

But life is not like that. Everyone has their own circumstances, and everyone has their own preferences in pleasures, and so the goal of everyone is not the same in exact terms -- only in abstract terms. And in abstract terms, it's very simple (and helpful, as a clear statement of a goal) to identify that what you would really like to have is "complete" pleasure with no mixture of pain.

But in our rush to think that there is a magic pill that everyone can experience the same way, we forget those differences, and we try to force "absence of pain" into a particular experience that we can climb into like a 1957 Chevy.

And the trouble is compounded because what is really in issue is not some abstract definition of a goal like a "kingdom of heaven." What really is the truth is that we don't live forever, our souls are not magical or divine, there's no life after death, no "god" to tell us what to do, and we have to ourselves use our time as we deem best, just like any other dolphin or horse or cat or dog or any other living thing must do. Only humans have the disposition to be lulled into complacency by thinking that there is some afterlife that we can look forward to as our reward, and thereby trade in our time in the here and now for a promise of something "better" later.

I don't believe Epicurus saw "absence of pain" as something equivalent to a kingdom of heaven for which we trade the pleasures that are available to us while we are alive. I think he saw that life is a real-life here-and-now experience in which the best we can do is to organize our activities so that the time that we are as happy as possible during the time that we have.

This is the opposite of monasticism or passivity or the kind of intellectualism that results in going round and round and debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It's a very practical call to action to use your life as productively as you can during the time that you have, with "productivity" defined not in terms of purely bodily pleasure or purely mental pleasure but in terms of whatever combination of both nature impresses on you as the "happiest" way to spend your time. To paraphrase Torquatus, the person who runs from all pain and mental and bodily activity and who cannot foresee the disaster to which that kind of life will lead is worthy of contempt, not a chair in philosophy. Likewise in Jefferson's advice to William Short, we need to "brace ourselves up" and get on with life, because the kind of soft indulgence in indolence that comes from what some people want to see as "absence of pain" is the furthest thing possible from what Epicurus actually taught.

Post by "Rolf" of April 16, 2025 at 3:11 AM

Hmm, related question I'm pondering this morning: Is NOT stubbing your toe pleasurable?

Post by "Don" of April 16, 2025 at 6:14 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Hmm, related question I'm pondering this morning: Is NOT stubbing your toe pleasurable?

I would say thinking about not stubbing your toe is pleasurable, for instance, if you just avoided it or are remembering a time that you almost stubbed your toe or if your friend tells you about their painful stub you realize you're glad you didn't stub yours (at the same time commiserating with your friend). I don't think there's a state of non-stubbing that somehow exists outside of specific contexts.

Post by "Kalosyni" of April 16, 2025 at 8:20 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

if you just avoided it or are remembering a time that you almost stubbed your toe

You would have to remember stubbing your toe badly to gain any pleasure from not stubbing your toe.

Post by “Don” of April 16, 2025 at 8:31 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

if you just avoided it or are remembering a time that you almost stubbed your toe

You would have to remember stubbing your toe badly to gain any pleasure from not stubbing your toe.

Good point. Although you could also remember seeing someone else badly stub their toe.

Post by “Cassius” of April 16, 2025 at 8:50 AM

I agree with Don and Kalosyni. This is an example of the opening of Book 2 of Lucretius. Thinking about the pains that you are free from is actually pleasurable too. But to be clear there are many kinds of pleasure, and that's not to say that thinking about not stubbing your toe is "the greatest pleasure" - it's just one of many that is open to you while you are alive. There are a lot more pleasures that i would advise pursuing before "meditating on your unstubbed-toe!"

Post by “Don” of April 16, 2025 at 8:59 AM

The Meditation of the Unstubbed Toe.

That's a title for *something* that needs to be written 😄

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 16, 2025 at 12:15 PM

There are a number of mental pleasures that are even more pleasurable than the sensation of our toes not throbbing, for example, the pleasure of knowing that clumsiness can be mitigated with awareness, and that we use rationality to relocate whichever pesky piece of furniture leapt in front of our poor toe's path, and then, even once you've stubbed your toe, it is incredibly pleasurable reflecting, each second, that the pain is quickly dissipating, and will disappear within minutes. Finally, I can remind myself that we usually don't need splints for broken toes, and the Nature inside us, perpetually seeking reduction of inflammation, heals itself without us even asking.

I'll accept being in a bit of physical pain, but having the mental confidence that it will pass more than I will having no pain at all, but lacking confidence, and being fearful of future stubbed toes. There's a lot of positive pleasure to be had in the mental exercises of gratitude and patience.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 16, 2025 at 4:34 PM

As to the physical pleasure of not stubbing your toe... Physically, not stubbing your toe is a non-event, since it didn't happen. Assuming that you have no other pain in your toe, your toe would have an absence of pain and thus pleasure.

Speaking as a man of a certain age, if my whole body had no physical pains, I would be in a state of great pleasure!

Post by “Al-Hakiim von Grof” of April 29, 2025 at 9:41 PM

Quote from Rolf

Hmm, related question I'm pondering this morning: Is NOT stubbing your toe pleasurable?

At the potential risk of repeating concepts already shared in this thread I'll take a stab at explaining my understanding. What follows is just *opinion* based on my understanding of Epicurus and lived experience.

To answer your question directly: absolutely. Not stubbing one's toe is pleasurable. Not just in the nervous "rush" and laughter that happens after a near miss or just in the idea of not stubbing one's toe, or recalling a stubbed toe's pain and therefore being grateful for its absence.

While all of those things are also surely sources of pleasure, I'd like to assert that the natural state of the human organism is pleasure.

This concept directly contradicts most religious theologies and even lots of philosophies that start with the foundational assertion "life is suffering" or any of its variants "fallen/broken world", or even an "evil world" that must be escaped as the gnostics believed.

I personally reject these concepts. I have seen how that insidious seed grows into a tree of maladapted behavior and mental anguish. It puts one at odds with the world and at its most extreme it cuts one completely off from the awesome beauty and joy that permeates existence.

Such an existence truly would be suffering, and in that way it's practically a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now, I don't just reject it, as stated above, I actually believe the opposite.

I've always been fascinated by indigenous peoples and tribal cultures from around the world and through all different time periods. Especially when viewed in contrast with settled peoples and "civilization" - as most would view it.

What I've learned from my readings has informed my life and views in many ways, and it's the root of my current assertion.

When the human body is fed and nourished with the appropriate foods i.e. adequate calories and ample nutrients with little to no consumption of garbage food products

And inhabits an evolutionarily consistent, egalitarian social structure (the close nit tribe)

And obtains adequate levels of sun exposure, exercise, "labor", and rest/recreation/play/socialization

The default human state IS pleasure. Not just theoretically, but literally. One experiences a mild state of pleasure constantly, unless disturbed by external circumstances (injury, loss of loved one, illness, etc.)

The explorers who lived among un-influenced tribal peoples all describe individuals who are happy, contented with life, positively natured and almost always down for a good time. They're free of depression, anxiety, chronic illness, etc.

This is the natural state of the human organism - truly raw existence.

And our birthright is health of mind and body and the pleasure that ensues.

I can attest first hand to the pleasurable effect of truly adequate nutrition alone. Ever since I buckled down and made micronutrients a priority in my life, even supplementing if necessary (Vit.D as I live in the north east and a large chunk of the year is essentially sunless.) I've experience a mild and permanent state of pleasure. My physical default became feeling strong and vital. My mental default became feeling positive and happy, way more relaxed, and way more stable (able to handle the humps and bumps of life, stuff just rolls off the shoulders).

And that's just one lever. I do have family I'm close with, and great friends, and a little family of my own with a lovely wife, an infant and another one on the way (that's what I've been busy with and why I haven't posted in a while haha). That's my "tribe" so to speak. And they also bring a huge amount of pleasure - my kids especially.

Anyway, this post is a bit scattered.

I just wanted to express that I truly believe not stubbing your toe is pleasurable, because the natural state of the human organism IS pleasure.

I think almost everybody in the modern developed world walks around with some form of chronic pain - either mental or physical or both. And maybe people don't even realize how

badly they feel because they haven't felt good in so long (I fell into that camp) And so the idea of "pleasure is the absence of pain" or "is NOT stubbing your toe pleasurable?" Has to be handled as some sort of theoretical discussion or abstract concept. Nah, dude. My lived experience has proven to me that the absence of pain is literally pleasurable because unless I've gone and injured myself or am experiencing some emotional disturbance rooted in some external event, I'm literally just feeling good all the time. The physical and mental embodiment of "life is good".

It just takes some prudence and wisdom to get out of the funk - out of the pain - and into pleasure.

P.S. I understand that I'm EXTREMELY fortunate to have a functional body and mind, and functional relationships (mostly), and a functional community to live within.

Not everybody has those things, and some people have none of them and that's an absolute tragedy. So I recognize that, unfortunately, it may not be possible for someone to experience mild pleasure as their default state. But with prudence and wisdom one can at least maximize the pleasure and minimize the pain and do the best they can with what they've got.

To them my words may ring hollow. But I figured it's still a perspective worth sharing because perhaps others have experienced or can experience the same as I do.