

Is All Desire Painful? How Would Epicurus Answer?

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2025 at 10:02 PM

This question has come up at least once or more in the past, but I cannot find the prior discussions. If I find them later I will add links to this post.

This came up tonight in our Wednesday Zoom, whether as a general rule all "desire" should be viewed as painful.

We had a close split of opinion on this, so no matter whether the answer is "Yes" or "No," we have some discussion that needs to take place. From an Epicurean perspective, I feel sure that this question has a firm answer, though at present I think I could argue either side equally. So that tells me there's work to be done on this.

The "Yes" camp argument can be summarized for now as something like: All desire indicates a wish that is unmet, and an unmet wish is painful, therefore all desire is painful.

The "No" camp argument is something like "desires can in fact be enjoyable, as on Christmas Eve for presents the next day, and it is only when I desire is in fact unmet and unmeetable that a desire is generally painful."

Also in considering the answer I would ask, "In Epicurean theory, is ANYTHING in life (even desire) always pleasurable except pleasure, or is anything always painful except pain?"

Post by "Don" of May 7, 2025 at 11:33 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would ask, "In Epicurean theory, is ANYTHING in life (even desire) always pleasurable except pleasure, or is anything always painful except pain?"

There is no pain or pleasure apart from the two feelings. I'm not saying you are intentionally, but your phrasing makes it sound like there is some abstract absolute thing called "pain" and "pleasure." There is no pleasure apart from the feeling of pleasure; there is no pain apart from the feeling of pain. When a person is experiencing something painful, there is pain. When there is no painful feeling, there is pleasure. When a person is experiencing a pleasurable feeling, there is pleasure. Saying something like "except pain" paints the wrong picture. It's similar to

saying "When I'm dead..." There is NO "I" when death is present. Likewise, there is no "pain" without someone experiencing a painful feeling.

I'd also add that there is no "desire" without someone desiring something.

As to "Is All Desire Painful?"... What happens if we expand it: "Is every desire accompanied by painful feelings?" since as I said, there is no standalone "pain" without a person feeling painful feelings.

If we look at some expanded synonyms or definitions that encompass the connotations of desire (epithymia; verb epithymeo) "set one's heart upon a thing, long for, covet, desire" there is definitely a perceived lack of something that someone wants to acquire. However, there is also the idea of aspiring to something, wanting to achieve something. In that case, is it a pleasant feeling to feel you are working toward a positive goal??

I don't know if my ramblings help the discussion, but this is an interesting question. I can see how the split happened in the discussion!

Post by “Joshua” of May 7, 2025 at 11:51 PM

Note: I started to write up a separate thread, but then noticed Cassius created this one. So I'm just copying over what I wrote there.

In light of a [recent thread](#) on the categories of desire, and another recent conversation on the topic of *this* thread, I wanted to add some clarity to why I answer the title question affirmatively; yes, I am provisionally of the opinion that desire is a kind of pain. As I said in a recent conversation, this is a consistent opinion, though not a strong one. I really am quite uncertain about this.

Desire is a conscious or unconscious feeling in the mind of wanting something; a preference to *have* where I *have not*, or to *have not* where I *have*.¹ Because a.) desire is a feeling, and because b.) "the feelings are two, pleasure and pain", desire is either;

1. Always pleasureable
2. Sometimes pleasureable and sometimes painful, or
3. Always painful.

The first proposition strikes me as facially absurd, but if some one wishes to defend it I'll hear them out. The main theater of dispute is between the second and third propositions. Before I

begin, I'll note something that will quickly become obvious - that this argument, which is ultimately about feelings, *pathe*, is also an argument about words and definition, and about how language is used and how it should be used.

Take, for example, the phrasing of the thread title; Is Desire a *Kind* of Pain? I argue that it is. But it could be said that in defending that precise construction I am using language in a way that is self-serving. This can be seen in my response to the following deductive argument:

- P1. There is nothing other than pain that is always painful, and there is nothing other than pleasure that is always pleasureable.
- P2. Desire is by definition something other than pain, and also something other than pleasure.
- C. Desire, then, is neither always painful, nor always pleasureable.

And now my response, in which I categorize desire differently:

- P1. The feeling of pain is always painful.
- P2. The feeling of pain is differentiable. Just as we speak of mental pain vs bodily pain, it is possible to speak with even greater precision of the kinds of mental pain, and the kinds of bodily pain.
- P3. Each kind of pain is always painful when it is present.
- P4. Desire is a kind of mental pain.
- C. Desire is always painful when it is present.

You see the importance of language. Now, here are my immediate responses to some other objections:

- Isn't my desire for the continuation of something good that I already have pleasureable?

No. The current enjoyment is pleasureable, and the feeling of security that comes with certainty of (if that were possible), or confidence in, future enjoyment is also pleasureable. Future pleasures are not pleasant until you feel them. Future pains are not painful until you feel them. Let's explore this further with the next objection:

- If it's Christmas Eve and presents are expected Christmas morning, isn't it pleasureable to anticipate those presents?

Perhaps, but anticipating is not the same as desiring. I can anticipate a slap to the face without ever desiring one. It is possible to experience both feelings at once, or, if not, then in quick succession. But the desire, when and if it is felt, is felt as a kind of pain.

Note that I have said nothing about the intensity of that pain. It may be the slightest prick, or it might be much greater.

If one does experience the desire for their Christmas presents on Christmas Eve, the desire is felt in that moment.

I'll stop there for now. Again, I don't feel nearly as strongly about this as I might seem to let on, and I think I could be easily persuaded to a different opinion. Epicurus himself refers to "desires that are not accompanied by pain when they go unfulfilled" in the Principle Doctrines. If he's right, I'm probably wrong.

1 I suppose I'm drawing a distinction between desires, which are mental, and fundamental biological urges, which are physical, and which even insects respond to. Do tapeworms have desires? I would think not...

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2025 at 6:20 AM

I see this as a significant difference in perspective:

[Quote from Don](#)

There is no pain or pleasure apart from the two feelings. I'm not saying you are intentionally, but your phrasing makes it sound like there is some abstract absolute thing called "pain" and "pleasure." There is no pleasure apart from the feeling of pleasure; there is no pain apart from the feeling of pain.

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Before I begin, I'll note something that will quickly become obvious - that this argument, which is ultimately about feelings, pathe, is also an argument about words and definition, and about how language is used and how it should be used.

And while I am not ready to state a final formulation myself, I do see my question in the latter light: It's true that pleasure is a feeling, but it is also true that "pleasure" is a word signifying a concept, and we have to be able to deal with both perspectives.

"In Epicurean theory, is ANYTHING in life (even desire) always pleasurable except pleasure, or is anything always painful except pain?"

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 8, 2025 at 10:02 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"In Epicurean theory, is ANYTHING in life (even desire) always pleasurable except pleasure, or is anything always painful except pain?"

Are you asking if a particular set of unfolding circumstances will always produce pleasure or always produce pain in a human being?

Such that:

If I am hungry and I eat something sweet it will always produce a feeling of pleasure.

-or-

If I someone forcefully sticks bamboo shoots under my fingernails it is always painful.

??

Post by “Cassius” of May 8, 2025 at 11:28 AM

Yes that is what I am asking. It's clear that in many cases a thing that is painful or pleasurable in one situation is the opposite in another situation. Eating the first cup of ice cream when you are hungry is pleasurable. Eating the 100th cup in a continuous sequence is likely painful.

Things which bring pain in one circumstance can bring pleasure in another.

Is there any external thing or circumstance (that is not itself defined as always painful) which at some time does not lose its character as generally painful and become pleasurable?

In other words, is "desire" itself a painful feeling that always has its root in pain, or is desire like ice cream, something that is neither intrinsically painful or pleasurable, but which can be painful or pleasurable depending on circumstance.

Post by “Don” of May 8, 2025 at 4:13 PM

Quick thought: desire is not a feeling. Desire is a function of the mind. We can have a feeling about a desire. But desires are cognitive.

Not sure if that helps. Placing here for later.

Post by “Joshua” of May 8, 2025 at 4:29 PM

Does the same hold for grief, sorrow, guilt, shame, fear, despair, etc?

Is happiness always pleasurable?

Post by “Cassius” of May 8, 2025 at 7:54 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Is there any external thing or circumstance (that is not itself defined as always painful) which at some time does not lose its character as generally painful and become pleasurable?

Joshua, that's why I included the parenthetical in this sentence. Happiness is a concept so close to pleasure that it's hard or impossible to separate it. There are also going to be things close to pain that aren't the same word but inseparably linked.

For this discussion to make sense i think we have to decide whether desire is separable from pain or pleasure or both.

It gets to looking like a word game, but in the end this is the kind of thing you have to do to communicate.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 8, 2025 at 8:04 PM

Is desire really only a function of the mind? Isn't it often physical... maybe even primarily physical? It ultimately has to be as everything is physical, even the mind.

One thing that's important, per my understanding of Epicurus, is to not conflate desires with pleasures. I interpret this, rightly or wrongly, as desires are not feelings and therefore not pains. Pleasure/pain is one biological function, desire is another.

I also think that it would be instructive to review modern biochemistry in this regard; it may or may not clarify Epicurus, but we have more information than he did and so it's worth reviewing the ideas from a contemporary standpoint. It's of note that our contemporary standpoint often validates Epicurus' thinking to a large degree, which is one reason why I for one find EP so appealing.

Post by “Joshua” of May 8, 2025 at 8:59 PM

Quote

Is there any external thing or circumstance (that is not itself defined as always painful) which at some time does not lose its character as generally painful and become pleasurable?

Does the meaning of this question change if you remove the word external?

This is a tangent, but consider the following Principle Doctrine:

Quote

[PD35](#). It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed to be confident that he will escape detection, even if, at present, he escapes a thousand times. For up to the time of death it cannot be certain that he will indeed escape.

Why does Epicurus think this is a problem for "the one who acts"? Cicero in *On Ends* suggests that this is not an effective deterrent; would Epicurus agree with him?

On Ends, Book II:

Quote

For those things which you were saying were very weak and powerless arguments,—when you urged that the wicked were tormented by their own consciences, and also by fear of punishment, which is either inflicted on them, or keeps them in constant fear that it will be inflicted. One ought not to imagine a man timid, or weak in his mind, nor a good man, who, whatever he has done, keeps tormenting himself, and dreads everything; but rather let us fancy one, who with great shrewdness refers everything to usefulness—an acute, crafty, wary man, able with ease to devise plans for deceiving any one secretly, without any witness, or any one being privy to it. Do you think that I am speaking of Lucius Tubulus?—who, when as prætor he had been sitting as judge upon the [pg 149]trial of some assassins, took money to influence his decision so undisguisedly, that the next year Publius Scævola, being tribune of the people, made a motion before the people, that an inquiry should be made into the case. In accordance with which decree of the people, Cnæus Cæpio, the consul, was ordered by the senate to investigate the affair. Tubulus immediately went into banishment, and did not dare to make any reply to the charge, for the matter was notorious.

XVII. We are not, therefore, inquiring about a man who is merely wicked, but about one who mingles cunning with his wickedness, (as Quintus Pompeius³² did when he repudiated the treaty of Numantia,) and yet who is not afraid of everything, but who has rather no regard for the stings of conscience, which it costs him no trouble at all to stifle; for a man who is called close and secret is so far from informing against himself, that he will even pretend to grieve at what is done wrong by another; for what else is the meaning of the word crafty (*versutus*)? I recollect on one occasion being present at a consultation held by Publius Sextilius Rufus, when he reported the case on which he asked advice to his friends in this manner: That he had been left heir to Quintus Fadius Gallus; in whose will it had been written that he had entreated Sextilius to take care that what he left behind him should come to his daughter. Sextilius denied that he had done so. He could deny it with impunity, for who was there to convict him? None of us believed him; and it was more likely that he should tell a lie whose interest it was to do so, than he who had set down in his will that he had made the request which he ought to have made. He added, moreover, that having sworn to comply with the Voconian³³ law, he did [pg 150]not dare to violate it, unless his friends were of a contrary opinion. I myself was very young when I was present on this occasion, but there were present also many men of the highest character, not one of whom thought that more ought to be given to Fadia than could come to her under the provisions of the Voconian law. Sextilius retained a very large inheritance; of which, if he had followed the opinion of those men who preferred what was right and honourable to all profit and advantage, he would never have touched a single penny. Do you think that he was afterwards anxious and uneasy in his mind on that account? Not a bit of it: on the contrary, he was a rich

man, owing to that inheritance, and he rejoiced in his riches, for he set a great value on money which was acquired not only without violating the laws, but even by the law.

As I said, this is a tangent. But it might be instructive.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 9, 2025 at 12:46 AM

Time warping from ancient Rome to the recent past... Several years ago I took some notes from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/P...58/#!po=31.0811>; here are some select quotations:

“From sensory pleasures and drugs of abuse to monetary, aesthetic and musical delights, all pleasures seem to involve the same hedonic brain systems, even when linked to anticipation and memory. Pleasures important to happiness, such as socializing with friends, and related traits of positive hedonic mood are thus all likely to draw upon the same neurobiological roots that evolved for sensory pleasures.”

“We note the rewarding properties for all pleasures are likely to be generated by hedonic brain circuits that are distinct from the mediation of other features of the same events (for example, sensory, cognitive) (Kringelbach 2005). Thus, pleasure is never merely a sensation or a thought, but is instead an additional hedonic gloss generated by the brain via dedicated systems (Frijda 2010).”

“Identification of hedonic substrates has been advanced by recognizing that pleasure or “liking” is but one component in the larger composite psychological process of reward, which also involves “wanting” and “learning” components (Smith et al. 2010).”

“In conclusion, so far as positive affect contributes to happiness, then considerable progress has been made in understanding the neurobiology of pleasure in ways that might be relevant. For example, we can imagine several possibilities to relate happiness to particular hedonic psychological processes discussed above. Thus, one way to conceive of hedonic happiness is as “liking” without “wanting.” That is, a state of pleasure without disruptive desires, a state of contentment (Kringelbach 2009). Another possibility is that moderate “wanting,” matched to positive “liking,” facilitates engagement with the world. A little incentive salience may add zest to the perception of life and perhaps even promote the construction of meaning, just as in some patients therapeutic deep brain stimulation may help lift the veil of depression by making life events more appealing. However, too much “wanting” can readily spiral into maladaptive patterns such as addiction, and is a direct route to great unhappiness. Finally, happiness of course springs not from any single component but from the interplay of higher pleasures,

positive appraisals of life meaning and social connectedness, all combined and merged by interaction between the brain's default networks and pleasure networks. Achieving the right hedonic balance in such ways may be crucial to keep one not just ticking over but actually happy." [I cringe at the use of "higher" pleasures, but overall, I'm seeing a distinction between pleasure networks and wanting (desire) networks.]

So I gather that the pleasure/pain network is separate from wanting (desire), but that they are integrally intertwined. This makes sense in light of our difficulty in determining whether desire is pain. It also reinforces the idea of desires not being the same as pleasure/pain when considered in regard to the categories of desires.

Another way to look at this might be that ice cream and desire both can lead to pleasure/pain, but neither are pleasures or pains. Ice cream and desire are different types of things from pleasure/pain, as well as from each other.

Post by "Don" of May 9, 2025 at 4:51 AM

My mind goes back and forth, but one question and direction that hit me was...(I'm going to a little stream of consciousness here, so bear with me as I think through this, admittedly a little haphazardly)...

Is All Desire Painful? If one answers it is, doesn't Epicurus call us to avoid pain? I realize that sometimes we choose pain for a greater pleasure. However, if we are going to maintain that something as basic to human nature as "desire" (epithymia) is ALWAYS painful - and we know its painful - isn't that a rationalization that we *should* limit desires to ONLY those that are natural and necessary? If ALL desires at ALL times are painful, why would we want to engage in activity that is guaranteed to bring us pain? Note, I'm not endorsing this rationalization. But if we maintain that "desire = pain" someone could make this argument.

I know we have to have a feeling about everything in our lives while we're living. We live. We feel. I've done this before to try to get our fixation off of one English word. Here are the 19 headwords for ἐπιθυμία in Woodhouse, S. C. (1910) *English-Greek Dictionary: A Vocabulary of the Attic Language*:

appetite idem, page 35.

aspiration idem, page 45.

bent idem, page 74.

caprice idem, page 112.

concupiscence idem, page 156.

craving idem, page 182.

desire idem, page 215.
hunger idem, page 410.
inclination idem, page 428.
itch idem, page 461.
longing idem, page 498.
lust idem, page 505.
passion idem, page 597.
predilection idem, page 634.
proneness idem, page 653.
vagary idem, page 942.
want idem, page 961.
whim idem, page 976.
wish idem, page 983.

If we begin to say desire is different from aspiration or wish, I don't know whether we can do that and keep to the spirit of the texts we have. That comb might be too fine. I'm thinking specifically of Epicurus' desire to plan for his community's and his friends' futures in his will. Did that aspiration/wish/desire bring him pleasure or pain? Was it painful to aspire/desire a good future for his friends and school?

Digression...

Note in VS21, Epicurus only talks of necessary, natural, and harmful desires. There's no talk of unnecessary or empty. Only desires which are harmful. Is he lumping "unnecessary" and "empty" together? I don't think so. I think his categorization (with doing absolutely no research into academic papers, etc.! so that caveat) categorization of desires was a work in progress. The slightly different wording in Menoikeus, the [Principal Doctrines](#), the Vatican Sayings, show that he revisited this idea for quite some time and we see that reflected in the various ways of talking about desires.

VS21. Nature must be persuaded (πειστέον), not overpowered (βιαστέον). And we will persuade nature by fulfilling the necessary desires, and the natural desires too if they cause no harm, but sharply rejecting the harmful desires. (Saint-Andre translation w/slight variation)

VS21. οὐ βιαστέον τὴν φύσιν ἀλλὰ πειστέον· πείσομεν δὲ τὰς ἀναγκαίαις ἐπιθυμίας ἐκπληροῦντες, τὰς τε φυσικὰς ἂν μὴ βλάπτωσι, τὰς δὲ βλαβερὰς πικρῶς ἐλέγχοντες.

πειστέον = win over someone to an act or course of actione sp. by speech or entreaty, oft. opp. compulsion or deception

NOTE the order in VS21: We are instructed to fulfill the NECESSARY desires and then the NATURAL desires " if they cause no harm" (ἂν μὴ βλάπτωσι). That "harm" is used throughout the latter PDs: [PD31](#) (to not harm one another or be harmed), [PD32](#) (With regard to those animals that do not have the power of making a covenant to not harm one another or be

harmed... making a covenant to not harm one another or be harmed.), [PD33](#) (Justice ...is always a compact to not harm one another or be harmed), [PD35](#) (an agreement to not harm one another or be harmed).

I would also add that, from the letter to Menoikeus, the "unnecessary" desires are encompassed within the natural desires in VS21: "among the natural desires some are natural and necessary whereas others are merely natural"

Post by "Don" of May 9, 2025 at 5:11 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

whether desire is separable from pain or pleasure or both.

Desire cannot be separable from pain or pleasure because we have feelings about everything that happens to us. While we are alive, we always FEEL pleasure or pain in varying degrees. BUT is it right to say "Desire IS painful?" I'm not so sure...but...hmmm...I'm not sure.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Is desire really only a function of the mind? Isn't it often physical... maybe even primarily physical? It ultimately has to be as everything is physical, even the mind.

I agree that everything is physical, or material if you will. I'm not sure what you mean by "physical" in this sense. Do you mean you can "feel" desire in the sense that a particular desire "makes your heart ache" or desiring something so hard you become sick to your stomach wanting it?

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

not conflate desires with pleasures.

Completely, 100% agree with this!!

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

desires are not feelings and therefore not pains. Pleasure/pain is one biological function, desire is another.

My only hesitation with this wording is that we can feel pain or pleasure ABOUT a desire? But I completely agree that we need to remember the natural/necessary/etc. categorization is about desire NOT pleasure.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

So I gather that the pleasure/pain network is separate from wanting (desire), but that they are integrally intertwined. This makes sense in light of our difficulty in determining whether desire is pain. It also reinforces the idea of desires not being the same as pleasure/pain when considered in regard to the categories of desires.

That does seem instructive, and I'd generally agree with your conclusions.

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Does the same hold for grief, sorrow, guilt, shame, fear, despair, etc?

Is happiness always pleasureable?

Interesting questions. I would say we feel pain in relation to those emotions, by definition... however, if someone is feeling the - let's say - "pain of fear" in a haunted house ride at an amusement park, are they feeling pain or pleasure? They expect to feel fear and yet they seek it out as a form of pleasure.

I would have to say that "happiness" is always pleasurable, especially if we're going to equate that with "eudaimonia": *Reflect on what brings happiness, because if you have that you have everything, but if not you will do everything to attain it.* (letter to Menoikeus) (Digression: (just realized that he's not actually saying "we will do anything to have happiness." He's saying we will do everything to have *what brings* happiness. Slightly different emphasis.)

Post by "Cassius" of May 9, 2025 at 6:30 AM

Quote from Godfrey

desires are not feelings and therefore not pains. Pleasure/pain is one biological function, desire is another.

[Quote from Don](#)

Completely, 100% agree with this!!

My only hesitation with this wording is that we can feel pain or pleasure ABOUT a desire? But I completely agree that we need to remember the natural/necessary/etc. categorization is about desire NOT pleasure.

I am coming around to the position that this is basically the general and ultimate answer to the question. Desire is neither painful nor pleasurable by definition/necessity. There are certain kinds of desires that we can generalize to more frequently lead to more pain than pleasure, and vice versa, but those desires themselves aren't by definition painful or pleasurable.

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. Yet much worse still is the man who says it is good not to be born but 'once born make haste to pass the gates of Death'.

The feeling of pleasure and pain weighs in on everything, especially in the way Epicurus says that you are always feeling, and expands the meaning of pleasure to encompass all feeling that isn't painful,

But only the concepts of pain and pleasure themselves "are" by definition pain and pleasure - everything else we discuss (this is what I meant by "external" earlier) is a reaction that varies with circumstance.

Post by “Don” of May 9, 2025 at 7:17 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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. Yet much worse still is the man who says it is good not to be born but 'once born make haste to pass the gates of Death'.

You're on to something, but don't overly rely on that translation to make your point. Here's my translation:

So, the one who exhorts, on the one hand, for the one who is young to live nobly; and, on the other hand, the one who is old to come to an end nobly is a good-hearted simpleton not only because *life is to be welcomed*** but also because the practice of living well, nobly, and

beautifully and the practice of dying well, nobly, and beautifully are the same. But far worse is the one who says, on the one hand, it is well not to be born; or, on the other hand, "failing this, to pass through the gates of Hades as soon as possible."

**οὐ μόνον ἅ τὸ τῆς ζωῆς ἀσπαστόν,... "not uniquely or only because of the 'welcoming-ness' of living,..." Or maybe better "because life *is to be welcomed*,..."

ἀσπαστός = welcome (whose arrival is a cause of joy)

Post by “Don” of May 9, 2025 at 7:22 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the concepts of pain and pleasure themselves "are" by definition pain and pleasure - everything else we discuss (this is what I meant by "external" earlier) is a reaction that varies with circumstance.

I don't like the word concepts here. Pain and pleasure are visceral felt sensations and are experienced by all creatures. Granted, we have to give words to them whether that is pain/pleasure, algos/hedone, dolor/voluptas. But they're not, in the end, abstract or constructed concepts like emotions.

Post by “TauPhi” of May 9, 2025 at 4:33 PM

I must say I have enjoyed reading this thread immensely. Thanks to all involved. I decided to put in my tuppence worth, so here we go.

An Epicurean pleasure is one of the canonical faculties which makes it completely independent from reason. Canonical pleasure is a feeling but "feeling pleasure" is something completely different and these two are not interchangeable. What we commonly describe as our feelings (pleasure, desire, grief, sadness, joy etc.) is our awareness (= reasoning) of a situation we find ourselves in. In this sense, our feelings have nothing to do (as they are dependent on our reasoning) with canonical feelings in Epicurean terms.

Desire is a non-canonical feeling. It's our awareness (again, cerebral activity) which signals to us that we find ourselves in a situation that is not optimally pleasant for us and we crave the

change. "Feeling desire" is always linked with "feeling pain". Similarly, "feeling happiness" is always linked with "feeling pleasure".

The problem seems to arise when we mix canonical pleasure with "feeling pleasure" (= mental awareness of being at the right time in the right sandbox with the right toys) and try to decide how this "Frankenstein pleasure" measures in relation to desire. Not a good idea. To sum up, I'm thinking this:

- 1) desire is always painful when we treat desire and "feeling pain" as conscious feelings (awareness of our situation)
- 2) Epicurean canonical feelings of pleasure and pain cannot equate to any conscious feelings (including desire)

Epicurus' classification of desires shows really well that Epicurus knew that desires are feelings in the sense of conscious (mis)understanding of our situation. He knew that when reasoning is involved people are prone to make mistakes in their judgements. Types of desires is a neat tool to increase our chances to reason well and to make choices that minimise pain and maximise pleasure.

Post by "Cassius" of May 9, 2025 at 9:00 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't like the word concepts here. Pain and pleasure are visceral felt sensations and are experienced by all creatures. Granted, we have to give words to them whether that is pain/pleasure, algos/hedone, dolor/voluptas. But they're not, in the end, abstract or constructed concepts like emotions.

At least for now, I think we're going to have to agree to disagree here, although this paragraph I quoted really doesn't express the point in issue. I of course agree with your view of please and pain and feelings. I just also believe that the same words can also be used as concepts to denote the full spectrum of pleasurable feelings (same with pain), and I think that Epicurus is using it both ways in different contexts as needed.

For example i think references to "limit of pleasure" are conceptual. Of course we can prove our concept is accurate by looking to the feelings, and that's why it all makes sense. But the "limit of quantity of pleasure" does not in my mind describe a "particular feeling." I would say that it describes a conceptual total that differs in every way between individuals other than in the conceptual way that it excludes all pains. I see the word "happiness" much the same way - it is certainly possible to "feel happy" but judging a life to be "happy" or "not happy" is mainly a

conceptual categorization.

Post by “Don” of May 9, 2025 at 11:05 PM

Yep, I think we are going to have to disagree; however, let me try to win you over to the dark side... or at least try to fully explain my position.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I of course agree with your view of please and pain and feelings. I just also believe that the same words can also be used as concepts to denote the full spectrum of pleasurable feelings (same with pain), and I think that Epicurus is using it both ways in different contexts as needed.

From my perspective, pleasure (hedone) and pain (various words: lype, algos) refer to the *feelings* we experience. However, I also agree with you that the words "denote the full spectrum of pleasurable feelings (same with pain)." As I read the texts, I understand Epicurus et al. to be saying that **ALL our feelings** - ALL of the ways that we experience what happens to us (the literal meaning of pathe) - fall into either being pleasure or pain. All we feel can be categorized into one or the other those overarching categories. So, I agree that he's "using it both ways in different contexts," but our feeling is the constant referent.

Diogenes Laertius: *They affirm that there are **two states of feeling**, pleasure and pain, **which arise in every animate being**, and that the one is favourable and the other hostile to that being, and by their means choice and avoidance are determined.*

I believe Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans were *firmly* rooted in physical reality. When you say "concepts" I hear "Platonic ideals that exist outside the physical world." And the word that he uses is consistent for pleasure - hedone - although different words for pain are sometimes used to juxtapose against pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

For example i think references to "limit of pleasure" are conceptual. Of course we can prove our concept is accurate by looking to the feelings, and that's why it all makes sense. But the "limit of quantity of pleasure" does not in my mind describe a "particular feeling."

I agree that the "limit of pleasure" doesn't describe a "particular feeling." Instead, it refers to an animate being feeling only pleasurable sensations. Which, as finite, animate, mortal beings we can never achieve. It's a goal to move toward. That's why we choose and reject desires. To move closer to the limit of pleasure even if it is an unattainable goal for us mortal beings. Just because it's unattainable, it still is a worthy goal even if pleasures can be added and subtracted to our experience.

As it says:

Diogenes Laertius: *Two sorts of happiness (eudaimonia) can be conceived, the one the highest possible*, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented, the other admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures (hedone).*

Eudaimonia falls under pleasure. *"The highest possible" to me reads like "the limit of pleasure." We live as mortal beings and experience pleasure that can be augmented by adding and subtracting pleasures (pleasurable feelings).

Post by "Don" of May 9, 2025 at 11:32 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Canonical pleasure is a feeling but "feeling pleasure" is something completely different and these two are not interchangeable.

I touched on this in my reply to [Cassius](#) but I felt a desire to respond directly to your post as well.

I disagree. As I mentioned above, from my reading, the Epicureans were firmly rooted in the physical world. Epicurus hit on using pleasure as a criteria of truth specifically because it was a visceral feeling which does "arise in every animate being."

Diogenes Laertius 10.31..34: *Now in The Canon Epicurus affirms that our sensations and preconceptions and our feelings (pathe) are the standards of truth ... They affirm that there are two states of feeling (pathe), pleasure and pain, which arise in every animate being, and that the one is favourable and the other hostile to that being, and by their means choice and avoidance are determined.*

Grief, sadness, joy, and all the emotions or feelings fall either under pleasure or pain.

I'm not a huge fan of Brene Brown, but her recent Atlas of the Heart set out to classify our emotions:

https://brenebrown.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Atlas-Resources_02_List-of-Emotions_FeaturedCover.png

In [looking over her chart](#), I think every one of those emotions or experiences can be classified as either pain or pleasure (or painful or pleasurable if you like). That's what Diogenes is referring to when he says of the Epicureans "there are two states of feeling (pathe), pleasure and pain, which arise in every animate being."

I'm still not sure desire is a feeling: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hidden-emotions/2016/01/desire-is-a-feeling>

The subtitle of that article gets at something that's been tickling my brain: "Emotion and desire are intimately related, but which one comes first? " I would substitute "feeling" for "emotion" for our purposes, but it'll do. I also like "some desires are purely physiological or biological, although even these, whether or not they be satisfied, *give rise to* emotions." (my emphasis added) . I still think we can have feelings about a desire but I don't think that I think that desire itself is a feeling.

In looking at Brene Brown's list, I keep thinking: We can have a desire for longing. We can wish for contentment. We can want to have our grief taken away. We can want ice cream. We can lust for sex. We can't just *desire/wish/want/lust*. We have to desire desire/wish/want/lust for *something*. There has to be an object, internal or external, *of* our desire/wish/aspiration/want. I think this is why I'm reluctant to assign the word "feeling" to desire. Now, we can pile feelings on top of desire if we don't get what we want (or if we do get what we want).

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

He knew that when reasoning is involved people are prone to make mistakes in their judgements. Types of desires is a neat tool to increase our chances to reason well and to make choices that minimise pain and maximise pleasure.

I like the way you worded this. I'm not sure how I can fit it into what I wrote above, BUT I wanted to acknowledge that I like the way you worded this AND to say I agree with your idea.

Post by "Cassius" of May 10, 2025 at 5:52 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I believe Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans were firmly rooted in physical reality. When you say "concepts" I hear "Platonic ideals that exist outside the physical world." And the word that he uses is consistent for pleasure - hedone - although different words for pain are sometimes used to juxtapose against pleasure.

I think the issue here is that I distinguish firmly between "ideal forms" which are a fantasy that does not exist, and "concepts" which is basically a definition or a picture in our minds or other product of rational thinking.

I think that concepts are what Diogenes Laertius is referring to when he says (Bailey):

Quote

[33] The concept they speak of as an apprehension or right opinion or thought or general idea stored within the mind, that is to say a recollection of what has often been presented from without, as for instance 'Such and such a thing is a man,' for the moment the word 'man' is spoken, immediately by means of the concept his form too is thought of, as the senses give us the information. Therefore the first signification of every name is immediate and clear evidence. And we could not look for the object of our search, unless we have first known it. For instance, we ask, 'Is that standing yonder a horse or a cow?' To do this we must know by means of a concept the shape of horse and of cow. Otherwise we could not have named them, unless we previously knew their appearance by means of a concept. So the concepts are clear and immediate evidence. Further, the decision of opinion depends on some previous clear and immediate evidence, to which we refer when we express it: for instance, 'How do we know whether this is a man?'

Now I know that we debate whether the word used there should be "concepts" as Baily does it or "preconcepts," but regardless of word choice here I think this description involves considering something and forming an opinion about it, and this is a process that very definitely does happen. It's also a process that I don't think anyone argues is the same as Plato's ideal forms.

So I would say that conceptual reasoning based on concepts is an important part of Epicurean philosophy, and that just as "man" can refer to men in general, or to John Brown of Virginia, "pleasure" can refer to pleasure in general or it can refer to a particular feeling in a particular context. Yes, the reason that it makes sense to refer to a particular feeling as pleasure is because we feel it to be pleasurable, but it is also valid and important to abstract into the single word "pleasure" all possible examples of pleasurable feelings so that we can discuss pleasure conceptually and understand that it is "Pleasure" and not divine will or ideal forms that constitutes the highest good.

Post by “Don” of May 10, 2025 at 7:26 AM

Thanks for the reply.

My first reaction to your post is that whether it's concepts or preconcepts in translation, the word there in 33 is prolepsis, so we're back to the discussion of what the canonic faculty of what prolepsis is.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

it is also valid and important to abstract into the single word "pleasure" all possible examples of pleasurable feelings so that we can discuss pleasure conceptually and understand that it is "Pleasure" and not divine will or ideal forms that constitutes the highest good.

See, that's where I'm not understanding where our disagreement lies. I agree that the single word pleasure encompasses all possible pleasurable feelings.

The words of Epicurus in his work On Choice are : "Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest ; joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity."

Right there, as an example, is Epicurus including ataraxia, aponia, joy, and delight under the heading of pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

that it is "Pleasure" ... that constitutes the highest good.

We can capitalize the word to make it appear more "conceptual" but they couldn't do that in the ancient world. It was all capital letters when Epicurus was writing. But he also explicitly says:

U67. I do not think I could conceive of the good (τάγαθὸν tagathon) without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms.

The word there is tagathon "the highest good." Here's including all those physical pleasurable feelings/activities within the definition of the supreme good.

The last point for now from me is that preconceptions (prolepsis) is a distinct leg of the canon apart from the feelings of pleasure and pain. I agree we have to have words to describe the myriad pleasurable and painful feelings, and words have to have a referent in the physical or

mental world. For me, when it comes to naming feelings, we feel the feeling then try to name it. That's one reason there are so many shades and intensities of pleasure and pain. Similarly but distinctly, we sense a pattern in the world through the proleptic faculty and call it justice or a cow or a tower.

This is a conversation that would work better as an actual conversation, but I remain engaged in the discussion.

Post by “Cassius” of May 10, 2025 at 9:13 AM

I left out an important point in my prior point when I was talking about no matter how the word is translated.

What I should have said there is that I think Bailey ended up calling it concept instead of preconcept because what Diogenes Laertius is describing (at least it seems to me) is clearly conceptual reasoning, which I gather you and I both think is very distinct from prolepsis.

Which means that I am siding with DeWitt's analysis of this section from Diogenes Laertius, and I think Diogenes Laertius is wrong in describing this process as proleptic.

DeWitt sees conflict between Diogenes Laertius' understanding of prolepsis:

Quote

And we could not look for the object of our search, unless we have first known it. For instance, we ask, 'Is that standing yonder a horse or a cow?' To do this we must know by means of a concept the shape of horse and of cow. Otherwise we could not have named them, unless we previously knew their appearance by means of a concept.

.... vs Velleius' (Cicero's) explanation of prolepsis in "On The Nature of The Gods":

Quote

"Anyone pondering on the baseless and irrational character of these doctrines ought to regard Epicurus with reverence, and to rank him as one of the very gods about whom we are inquiring. For he alone perceived, first, that the gods exist, because nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind. For what nation or what tribe of men is there but possesses untaught some 'preconception' of

the gods? Such notions Epicurus designates by the word *prolepsis*, that is, a sort of preconceived mental picture of a thing, without which nothing can be understood or investigated or discussed. The force and value of this argument we learn in that work of genius, Epicurus's *Rule or Standard of Judgment*.

... and DeWitt thinks Velleius' explanation is more consistent with Epicurus' use of the term,

So I'm going at present with the view that what DL is explaining is not *prolepsis* but ordinary conceptual reasoning, involving comparing one opinion against another. In contrast what Velleius is explaining is something "nature-imprinted" and "without which nothing can be understood or investigated or discussed." This latter statement seems to me to describe something that deserves to be considered as "canonical."

I would distinguish that from: "I've seen five cows and horses now I have a picture in my mind to which I am going to attach the name 'cow' and 'horse' (or any number of other words in other languages). Certainly that's related to how the mind works, and I would say that *prolepsis* is involved in even getting the mind working, but by the time you are talking about "cows" and "horses," and we apply those words when we see other animals, you are in my view in the realm of comparing opinions against each other, and I think we agree that opinions are not preconceptions.

Post by “sanantoniogarden” of May 10, 2025 at 3:42 PM

I'm hesitant to say that Epicurus would hold that Desires are either wholly painful or wholly pleasurable. Desires have to exist in a sort of neutral Natural sense almost entirely biological. Most of the basic Natural and necessary desires are driven by biological instinct, to satisfy hunger and thirst, shelter from the elements and a community of friendship to shelter from the human predicament.

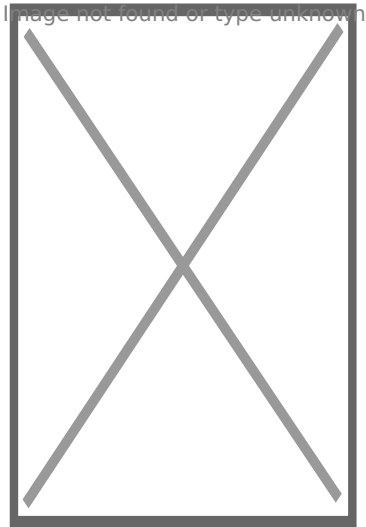
It seems that on a surface level saying that all Desires are painful might lead one to the ascetic side of Epicureanism. To my understanding there are only two states one can exist in, pleasure or pain, if all Desires are in fact painful, the removal of those Desires would increase one's pleasure more than actually satisfying those Desires. You never have that desire you never have that pain. Because as we all know satisfying a desire would lead to more desires (more pain) unless one educates themselves (where the calculus enters). If all Desires are pleasurable, would it at all make sense to have that desire delayed as long as possible, since desire is wholly pleasurable? Because satisfying a pleasurable desire would remove that pleasurable desire and briefly increase pain until a new pleasurable desire is found? (Playing devil's advocate with these questions)

Post by “TauPhi” of June 15, 2025 at 9:23 PM

I found below quote in a book I'm currently reading and the quote reminded me of this thread. The quote comes originally from Aristotle's 'On the Soul' - Book 2. I'm not exactly a big fan of Aristotle (to put it mildly) but the quote caught my attention since it links two of Epicurean canonical faculties (senses and feelings) with desire. For your consideration:

Quote

[...] But all animals have at least one sense, touch: and, where sensation is found, there is pleasure and pain, and that which causes pleasure and pain; and, where these are, there also is desire, desire being appetite for what is pleasurable. [...]



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