

Comparing The Pleasure of A Great Physicist Making A Discovery To The Pleasure of A Lion Eating A Lamb

Post by “Cassius” of August 31, 2025 at 1:56 PM

In today's Sunday Zoom a question to the effect stated in the title of this thread was posed by [Raphael Raul](#).

In response, [TauPhi](#) disagreed that the pleasure of the one might be evaluated as "greater" than the pleasure of the other.

We'll continue this discussion next week as part our next Sunday Zoom, but I'm setting up this thread to allow for further discussion in the meantime.

My summary of the issues is doubtlessly superficial but hopefully this is enough to preserve the sense of the discussion.

Post by “Martin” of September 1, 2025 at 4:05 AM

"Engaging In Discovery" should be changed to "Making a Discovery" or similar because the path to a discovery is more or less painful, as expressed in quotes attributed to Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein on the ratio of inspiration to perspiration. We can skip the "Great" because the pleasure I had with my small discoveries was certainly not less than the great physicists had with their great ones, in analogy to the "Great Physicist" and the lion.

Post by “TauPhi” of September 1, 2025 at 5:14 AM

[Cassius](#) Please also remove 'any consideration'. I rejected that the pleasure of the one might be evaluated as "greater" than the pleasure of the other but I did not and do not reject the act of thinking about it. I'm all in for considering anything and everything anyone is capable of thinking about.

Post by “Cassius” of September 1, 2025 at 7:21 AM

[TauPhi](#) is this ok?

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In response, TauPhi disagreed that the pleasure of the one might be evaluated as "greater" than the pleasure of the other.

Post by “Cassius” of September 1, 2025 at 7:26 AM

[Quote from Martin](#)

"Engaging In Discovery" should be changed to "Making a Discovery" or similar because the path to a discovery is more or less painful, as expressed in quotes attributed to Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein on the ratio of inspiration to perspiration. We can skip the "Great" because the pleasure I had with my small discoveries was certainly not less than the great physicists had with their great ones, in analogy to the "Great Physicist" and the lion.

Martin --

I've changed "Engaging" to "Making," However at the moment I've left the "great" because I suspect that Raphael considered it a significant part of the hypothetical that the person making the discovery was Albert Einstein as opposed to a generic physicist.

However as in the discussion of all hypothetical questions, pinning down the key presumptions is important, so it may well be that the identity of the physicist is an important part of the question Raphael is posing, and that's part of what should be discussed.

Post by “TauPhi” of September 1, 2025 at 7:57 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

TauPhi is this ok?

It is. Thank you.

Post by “kochiekoch” of September 3, 2025 at 10:31 PM

Old debate. Does push-pin give equal pleasure to poetry? It's similar to the debate here with the lion eating his/her prey and the scientist making the great discovery.

Jeremy Bentham supposedly said that push pin was the equal of poetry even though that's a misrepresentation from John Steward Mill, with Mill arguing the quality of the pleasure mattered. Poetry creating a superior pleasure to a children's table game in Mill's view.

[Push-pin \(game\) - Wikipedia](#)

My take on the debate on the thread here is that pleasure is pleasure and the two are of equal value in the moment, but the scientist with his great discovery has the greatest pleasure over time. He gets to enjoy the accolade's as his discovery is confirmed and also gets pleasure from contemplating his discovery. He can use it as well as a springboard for future discoveries and pleasures from that. All consistent with the Epicurean perspective of mental pleasures being superior because they can be enjoyed in the present, past and future.

Post by “Martin” of September 4, 2025 at 5:31 AM

There is not necessarily great pleasure over time for a scientist. Paul Ehrenfest contributed to quantum theory but felt that peers made greater discoveries around the same time and committed suicide.

In other cases, peers have dismissed a revolutionary new theory, even with ad-hominem. Accolades which come in only posthumously are too late. Examples of this are Ludwig Boltzmann and Alfred Wegener (geologist, but close enough). In Boltzmann's case, the hostility by peers probably contributed to his suicide. Dan Shechtman's discovery of quasicrystals was initially rejected, even by his boss, such that Dan Shechtman had to leave his research group and was the target of ridicule, e.g. Linus Pauling's infamous ad-hominem "There are no quasicrystals, only quasi-scientists". Luckily, Dan Shechtman is not a "snowflake" like Boltzmann and Ehrenfest may appear to have been and got eventually the accolades, including

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4703-comparing-the-pleasure-of-a-great-physicist-making-a-discovery-to-the-pleasure-o/>

the 2011 Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

Post by “kochiekoch” of September 4, 2025 at 5:55 AM

Good points Martin. I hadn't thought of that. I was just thinking of Einstein in particular.

Post by “Adrastus” of September 4, 2025 at 6:36 AM

I also wonder, per [Martin](#) 's excellent comment, how and in what way a physicist or anyone achieving something grand intellectually, experiences pleasure. I have had obviously much lesser experiences of pride and fame and more distinct understanding of what I did as not particularly laudable; but I personally dismissed most of that mild 'lauding' of "achievement" unless it came from specific people I actually yearned for other deeper emotional needs from. An attaboy coming from a stranger or an acquaintance or even Friend means less to me than that coming from the family member I always wanted to feel connected to or wanted approval from.

Can we truly recommend pleasures of "self-actualizing" or "achievement" if we do not have some model such as Maslow's Hierachy of Needs, where lower levels of needs are already deeply felt and secured? I generally tend to associate the sentiments towards even mild fame and notoriety with a distinctly lesser quality than more "basely" human needs and desires; like a well prepared meal, perhaps even given the time to be foraged, grown or hunted, with the best of Friendly company. And I think that bears out well in Epicurean thought and other ancient "hedonic" thought like in Yang Chu who speaks ill even of grand funerary rites.

Post by “Cassius” of September 4, 2025 at 8:25 AM

@Raphael can you comment on this, because this is not the way I understood your question:

▮ [Quote from kochiekoch](#)

Old debate. Does push-pin give equal pleasure to poetry? It's similar to the debate here with the lion eating his/her prey and the scientist making the great discovery.

Jeremy Bentham supposedly said that push pin was the equal of poetry even though that's a misrepresentation from John Steward Mill, with Mill arguing the quality of the pleasure mattered. Poetry creating a superior pleasure to a children's table game in Mill's view.

Push-pin (game) - Wikipedia

My take on the debate on the thread here is that pleasure is pleasure and the two are of equal value in the moment, but the scientist with his great discovery has the greatest pleasure over time. He gets to enjoy the accolade's as his discovery is confirmed and also gets pleasure from contemplating his discovery. He can use it as well as a springboard for future discoveries and pleasures from that. All consistent with the Epicurean perspective of mental pleasures being superior because they can be enjoyed in the present, past and future.

Focusing on this sentence in particular:

My take on the debate on the thread here is that pleasure is pleasure and the two are of equal value in the moment, but the scientist with his great discovery has the greatest pleasure over time.

As for me, the pleasure I get from a great poem is not at all the same as the pleasure I get from push-pin. I can certainly differentiate the two and prefer one to the other, so I would not agree with the underlined section if the question is how "I" value them to me. The two are not of equal value to me no matter how long the experience.

I'd still like to find the Bentham citation directly to see what is being referenced.

My understanding of the dispute was that Bentham and/or others were considering whether pleasure could be reduced to units of some kind, in which context it would make senses to consider the greatest good for the greatest number by adding up all the pleasure units to see in which configuration the number is largest.

My further understanding of the situation is that this is impossible - or an invalid approach - because there is no objective standard by which we can compare pleasure units between individuals, which is exactly the issue with comparing pleasure between lions and humans. From the point of view of the lion the eating of the prey is an extreme pleasure, while from the point of view of the physicist the discovery is an extreme pleasure, but there is no "objective" way to measure the units of pleasure being created so as to say that one generated more "pleasure" than the other.

Are we are not trying to focus on the issues involved in comparing the pleasure of a lion to the pleasure of a physicist in order to dramatize the question of whether pleasure can be "objectively" measured? If not, then I don't even know what the discussion is about! 😊

Post by "Cassius" of September 4, 2025 at 8:48 AM

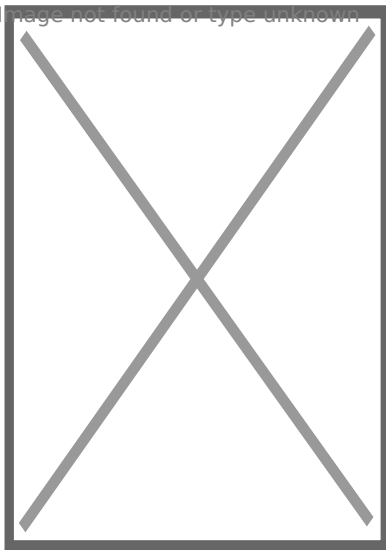
This appears to be Steve's citation but I need a PDF or link to Gutenberg for more context:

"Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either."

This quote is found in Book III, Chapter I of The Rationale of Reward.

[Quote from NewWorldEncyclopedia](#)

Bentham's hedonism



Jeremy Bentham

Bentham believed any particular pleasure or pain had a determinate value, which could be measured and compared. He attempted to construct a scale of comparison and measurement of pain and pleasure. He called this scale the felicific calculus. He claimed that the value of a pleasure was to be determined by such factors as its

duration and its intensity. Bentham's hedonism may be labeled quantitative hedonism, since all pleasures and pains appear on the same scale, being measured according to the same set of criteria (such as duration and intensity).

This assumption—all pleasures and pains can, in principle, be subjected to the same such measurement—entails that all pleasures are ultimately of the same sort, and that no pleasure is by its very nature superior to any other. Bentham argues, "The utility of all these arts and sciences, ...the value which they possess, is exactly in proportion to the pleasure they yield. Every other species of preeminence which may be attempted to be established among them is altogether fanciful. Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either."^[2] Bentham's assumption that all pleasures and pains can, in principle, be subjected to such measurement entails that "push-pin may be better than as poetry." Pushpin was a simple child's game played at the time, perhaps comparable to tiddlywinks. It all depends on the amount of pleasure one actually gains from the activity.

Post by "Cassius" of September 4, 2025 at 8:54 AM

We've discussed issues like this in the past such as whether we can construct a Calculus of Pleasure spreadsheet to help us plan our choices in life.

I recall my conclusion to have been that such an exercise is of definite value to ME, or would be for any other individual, but that it would be absolutely invalid to transfer or apply the results of my calculation to another person, because each person answers these problems differently.

So while the lion and the physicist both have their own scales and reports of pleasure experiences, by which they definitely do rank their choices and pleasures, I would say it is simply invalid to compare the pleasure of the lion to that of a physicist, or between ANY two individuals no matter how you dramatize their "value to the world," because there is no agreed objective standard by which to compare.

Past spreadsheet posts are below. I don't use anything like this on a regular basis, and I don't think it's practical to try to do so. However if I were faced with a big decision or evaluation at a particular point in time I do think something like this would be useful. And I am sure that others could design a better implementation as a spreadsheet or using other paradigms. The activities listed on the draft are far too general but were put there just as fillers. Despite the difficulties, I've always thought that it was too extreme to assert that calculations such as this are impossible or totally useless for an individual. Seems to me that the raw format is pretty much

exactly how our minds work in evaluating choices, to the extent that we do use our minds to make decisions in a particular case.

Post

[RE: A Draft Epicurean Pleasure Maximization Worksheet](#)

I have attached to the original post in this thread an xls / Libreoffice Calc version of the spreadsheet which should be usable in any spreadsheet software. I prepared it in the free Libreoffice format so that it would be accessible to the most people. I will see about uploading this back to Google docs as well.

This should be the same document, in Google Sheets - <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d...dit?usp=sharing>



Cassius

July 13, 2019 at 2:13 PM

Post

[RE: The Normal Curve of Pleasure](#)

Anybody coming across this thread and getting motivated to plot some bell curves might want to also consult the earlier thread in which a "spreadsheet" was discussed:

epicureanfriends.com/thread/?postID=3781#post3781 Even though pictorial and mathematical representations are limited, and cannot possibly capture the "feelings" that are involved in pleasure and pain, I continue to think that the process of working through them is useful, especially in that trying to formulate them emphasizes *how*...



Cassius

July 23, 2024 at 11:15 AM

Post by “Eikadistes” of September 4, 2025 at 9:35 AM

Perhaps the *Eureka!* moment of a life-changing discovery is more like an intellectual orgasm.

Or maybe it's like getting "abducted by aliens". If you genuinely believe you gained new perspective, you experience both (1) the excitement of certainty, and (2) the fear of social ridicule.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4703-comparing-the-pleasure-of-a-great-physicist-making-a-discovery-to-the-pleasure-o/>

Post by “Cassius” of September 4, 2025 at 10:03 AM

Another general comment about why I think topics like this are so helpful.

To me, when you drill down and realize that for an individual some pleasures are much "greater" than others in terms of intensity, duration, and parts of the body affected, you see clearly that some specific pleasures are much more desirable to you than others. All pleasure is pleasure because it is desirable, but all pleasures are not the same in every respect to all people at all times, or even to the same person at different times, and therefore as to specific characteristics, some pleasurable experiences can be more pleasurable (more intense, longer lasting, or affecting more parts of the body) than others.

This observations exposes as absolute B.S. the ascetic interpretation: that we should simply work to remove all specific pains, and therefore abrakadabra we are at the height of our individual experience of pleasure.

In my humble opinion no human being of moderate intelligence, and certainly not Epicurus, would make such an assertion. Epicurus' assertion was the philosophic one that when you have 100% pleasure you cannot go to 101%, and that constitutes the limit of pleasure. Epicurus never said to discard your common sense and experience and think that for you, a life of filing your fingernails is the equivalent of a life of a physicist going from discovery to discovery.

In order to experience the height of pleasure possible TO YOU, you must act to make sure that your pleasures are those that you in fact feel to be the best possible combination of pleasures to you. Obsessing over identification and removal of every pain does nothing to optimize your best mix of activities and therefore pleasures.

And that's why I will always maintain that what people are doing by discussing "Absence of pain" without explaining this context is playing into the hands of Cicero and Plutarch and all the other enemies of Epicurus.

Post by “Godfrey” of September 4, 2025 at 12:13 PM

Digressing to a physicist, or anyone making a creative discovery or innovation....

The desire for fame is what I would consider a prime example of an unnatural desire, so I'll ignore that. Even so, often a creative discovery is the result of "scratching an itch," or problem solving to remove a pain. Additionally, the creative process itself is often pleasurable yet often

tortuous. All to say that the predominance of pleasure over pain might be quantifiable in retrospect for a very specific instance, but that it's ridiculous to try to make a generic statement ranking the pleasure of making a discovery as higher or lower than any other specific pleasure.

By which I'm agreeing with the posts above that emphasize that understanding the guidance of one's personal pleasures and pains is the proper emphasis for living an Epicurean lifestyle.

Post by “Cassius” of September 4, 2025 at 2:56 PM

Godfrey I am aware that your post is largely in agreement with prior posts, so that's good and I should not stir the pot 😊

However on this part I am curious, because I would think that it would probably be a generality that a physicist would likely consider discovery as generically more pleasurable than many other pleasures, *or else one would not choose to be a physicist as an occupation?*

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Even so, often a creative discovery is the result of "scratching an itch," or problem solving to remove a pain. Additionally, the creative process itself is often pleasurable yet often tortuous. All to say that the predominance of pleasure over pain might be quantifiable in retrospect for a very specific instance, but that it's ridiculous to try to make a generic statement ranking the pleasure of making a discovery as higher or lower than any other specific pleasure.

Post by “Raphael Raul” of September 4, 2025 at 4:31 PM

Yes, Cassius, I will comment by Saturday evening or Sunday morning, as I am in the midst of teaching my Wednesday and Thursday Art workshop, which involves a total of 24 students and their artworks to attend to, plus slide lectures....

The discussions that I have scanned so far are fascinating.

I will start reading them in depth after today's classes and then comment.

Post by “kochiekoch” of September 4, 2025 at 4:31 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

My take on the debate on the thread here is that pleasure is pleasure and the two are of equal value in the moment, but the scientist with his great discovery has the greatest pleasure over time.

As for me, the pleasure I get from a great poem is not at all the same as the pleasure I get from push-pin. I can certainly differentiate the two and prefer one to the other, so I would not agree with the underlined section if the question is how "I" value them to me. The two are not of equal value to me no matter how long the experience.

Right. That's why Bentham says to look at the issue without prejudice. You would certainly THINK poetry would be the better pleasure. Not so according to him if you're getting more pleasure from push-pin.

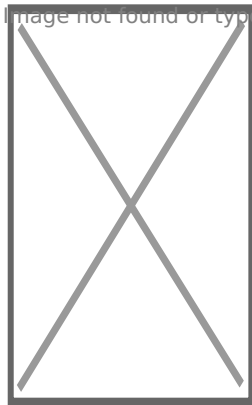
Of course, the pleasure of discovery and paleoeating might not be equivalent at the time. The scientist might have a migraine headache at the time. The lion might not be hungry, but picking up a small, easily captured snack for fun. As you point out it would be subjective.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I'd still like to find the Bentham citation directly to see what is being referenced.

Coming right up:

Image not found of type unknown



[The Rationale of Reward](#)

books.google.com

What this quote did was set off John Steward Mill and he came up with the misrepresented quote, attributed to Bentham, that push-pin was as pleasurable as poetry.

Of note, pins in the 18th century were fabulously expensive compared to now. A bunch of pins would cost a day's wage for a skilled workman. A single sewing needle would cost the same. All because they were hand made. Push-pin could be serious gambling! 😄

Post by “Cassius” of September 4, 2025 at 4:41 PM

Thank you for the direct link Kochie!

Post by “kochiekoch” of September 4, 2025 at 4:53 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

To me, when you drill down and realize that for an individual some pleasures are much "greater" than others in terms of intensity, duration, and parts of the body affected, you see clearly that some specific pleasures are much more desirable to you than others. All pleasure is pleasure because it is desirable, but all pleasures are not the same in every respect to all people at all times, or even to the same person at different times, and therefore as to specific characteristics, some pleasurable experiences can be more pleasurable (more intense, longer lasting, or affecting more parts of the body) than others.

Right. We're making an assumption that the discovery of the scientist and the meal of the predator make each enjoy maximum pleasure. In as much as they are both mammals, with a common ancestor, the experiences would be equivalent as pleasure is pleasure.

Certainly, we can't demonstrate this scientifically as the scientist would have to hold off his discovery until we can get him in an MRI and getting the lion in the MRI presents obvious difficulties. 😄

We're making assumptions in as much as we are doing philosophy here not science. 😊

Post by “kochiekoch” of September 4, 2025 at 4:56 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Thank you for the direct link Kochie!

My pleasure! 😊

(The good according to hedonistic theory).

Post by “Patrikios” of September 4, 2025 at 5:51 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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[Cassius](#)

I was reading some of the excerpts from #Philodemus, and came across this reference which supports the view that the scale of pleasure depends on the individual and circumstances.

Quote

in "**On Choices and Avoidances**," Philodemus discusses how:

"Different circumstances and conditions of individuals affect their experience of pleasure" (Col. XII.7-14)

Post by “Godfrey” of September 5, 2025 at 11:25 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4703-comparing-the-pleasure-of-a-great-physicist-making-a-discovery-to-the-pleasure-o/>

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would think that it would probably be a generality that a physicist would likely consider discovery as generically more pleasurable than many other pleasures, or else one would not choose to be a physicist

True, but this choice would then be tested by actual experience once the choice has been made. As another example, consider somebody who chooses the law as a profession. Many who make that choice continue in a long and pleasurable career, while others quickly burn out and find something less painful to pursue. And for the ones who remain in the profession, often a process ensues of navigating their way to the most enjoyable way to practice, which may prove to be far different than the practice they initially envisioned.

Post by “Raphael Raul” of September 5, 2025 at 7:38 PM

In last Sunday's discussion, I posed a question in response to Tau Phi's statement, which is paraphrased here on the site as "That the pleasure of the one might be evaluated as 'greater' than the pleasure of the other. Tau Phi may want to respond, whether this wording of his statement is correct or not. ...Moving on, the question I posed to Tau Phi, and which now I repose and have the opportunity here to give it more lively detail, is the following: ..."Imagine a lion has just killed an antelope and he has settled down to have and enjoy his delicious, bloody, and fleshy meal. And imagine Albert Einstein, the great physicist, having just discovered in the lonely dark of his bedroom, using applied differential geometry, that he had just mathematically described the curvature of space-time. And knowing that this discovery was a revolution in physics, upending two centuries of Newtonian Mechanics."...So, which is the greater pleasure, or more precisely, the 'higher pleasure, that of the lion or that of Albert Einstein? Or if this kind of valuation is even possible concerning personal pleasures? ...Does Epicureanism not have a view on this?

Post by “Cassius” of September 5, 2025 at 10:23 PM

Thank you for restating that Raphael - that avoids a lot of ambiguity.

Post by “Raphael Raul” of September 6, 2025 at 6:00 PM

Comparing The Pleasure of A Great Physicist Making A Discovery To The Pleasure of A Lion Eating An Antelope.

I would like to start by addressing Tau Phi's assertion that "The pleasure of one cannot be evaluated as "greater" than the pleasure of another." I agree with this claim from a subjective perspective, because the lion is sustaining itself and having the pleasure of his bloody, fleshy meal, and is unaware of the profound joy that Albert Einstein experiences when discovering new scientific truths. Similarly, we, as humans, are unable to fathom the extraordinary pleasures that the gods, as Epicurus states, experience in their blissful existence.

From a third-party perspective—say, that of philosophers like Epicurus, Aristotle, or Plato and from our own experience—we could assert that Einstein's intellectual pleasure in making his groundbreaking discoveries represents a higher form of enjoyment compared to the more instinctual pleasure that a lion derives from devouring the antelope.

Personally, as someone who enjoys hearty meals like a thick porterhouse steak with potatoes and gravy, now and then, I can appreciate the immense satisfaction the lion finds in its bloody, fleashy feast. While all pleasures are inherently good, I believe that the higher pleasures of the mind—such as tranquility, intellectual fulfillment, and artistic creativity—hold greater value to me than bodily or material pleasures, which by the way, should not be dismissed as they are fundamental to our physical survival and mental, creative activities.

After enjoying my steak, I often take a walk on a lovely summer evening, allowing my meal to settle. However, just twenty minutes into my walk, my thoughts often drift to a painting I am working on; I find myself engaged in mentally exploring its technical challenges, such as perspective, tonal structure, artistic anatomy, etc., and its artistic application. This shift signifies a transition from a fleeting, material pleasure to a more enduring mental satisfaction. Again, I do not disavow the importance of our physical and material appetites, as many religious and philosophical systems have perpetrated historically on mankind. On the contrary, I enjoy them wholeheartedly when they arrive.

In my experience though, the enjoyment of physical pleasures tends to be short-lived, prompting me to seek out higher mental pleasures instead, such as reading history, philosophy, making music and art. At this very moment, as I write this post, I am immersed in the kind of intellectual engagement that Epicurus advocated nearly 2,300 years ago, a perspective echoed by other great thinkers throughout history.

Principal Doctrine, 20

"The body receives as unlimited time the pleasure's limit; but the mind, grasping the reasons and causes of this pleasure and removing all fears and desires and superstitions, receives as unlimited time, both the pleasure's limit and the tranquility which comes from rational thought."

I quote here Kochiekoch: "My take on the debate on the thread here is that pleasure is pleasure and the two are of equal value in the moment, but the scientist with his great discovery has the greatest pleasure over time. He gets to enjoy the accolade's as his discovery is confirmed and also gets pleasure from contemplating his discovery. He can use it as well as a springboard for future discoveries and pleasures from that. All consistent with the Epicurean perspective of mental pleasures being superior because they can be enjoyed in the present, past and future."

I want to reaffirm my agreement with Tau Phi's statement: "The pleasure of one cannot be considered 'greater' than the pleasure of another." However, this statement is valid only from the subjective viewpoints of the Lion and Albert Einstein. From a third-party perspective, it is controversial, if not entirely an untenable assertion, particularly among those who appreciate the pleasures of intellectual, artistic thought, and creation, and who have reflected on their value. In that case, Albert Einstein's pleasure in his scientific discovery represents a longer-lasting mental pleasure, one that can produce further mental pleasures, as it did for Einstein throughout his life, till his death.

...Oh, and by the way...I am having sizzling, juicy pork chops with salad for dinner tonight! 😊

Post by "Cassius" of September 6, 2025 at 7:08 PM

Thanks for that post Raphael!

My first comment is to think about how someone outside our Epicurean analysis community might react to reading that.

I can imagine an outsider saying: *"You mean to tell me he needs to write an essay to explain that the pleasure of artwork is different from the pleasure of eating, and that the pleasures of a great physicist have more impact on wider human affairs than a lion eating lamb? What's up with those guys that they have to write walls of text to say what everyone already understands?"*

That's of course not to be critical of the post, but to say that there are issues going on behind the fact that we are having this discussion that need to be made front and center.

My outsider might say to me: *"Is someone arguing that here is no difference between creating art or exploring physics and eating a steak? is someone arguing that a lion eating a lamb has the same impact on world affairs as a discovery in nuclear fusion? No one i know thinks that way, certainly Epicurus doesn't either, does he?"*

And I would say to my outsider that therein hangs the tale. Epicurus *doesn't* say that the pleasures of eating and the pleasures of art and discovery are the same, or that one *doesn't* have more impact on world affairs or produce a greater impact on us individually.

And my outsider would say, *"Then what is the problem?"*

Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2025 at 2:22 PM

We had a very good followup discussion on this in today's zoom meeting.

Clearly people are coming at this from different angles, all of which are legitimate. The reaction of some, however, was "I thought this problem was settled," or to the effect that they did not understand why the question exists.

That was the intent of my followup to Raphael's post. In addition to the on-the-surface question of whether pleasures differ from one another, and in what contexts (if any) it is good Epicureanism to consider that some pleasures are different, better, or more valuable than others, I see a very practical application of this question being as follows:

Cicero, Plutarch, and many critics, including some "friends," say that Epicurean philosophy leads to the conclusion that the best life for everyone is the equivalent of "playing pushpins" - with pushpins being understood to mean any very simple, very unambitious, very safe, past-time. Is this a correct conclusion? If not, why not? {I trust it is clear that my own answer is a very firm "NO", but just in case lurkers read this in isolation I want the record to be clear.}

And while "Epicurus didn't do that" may be part of the answer, the full answer needs to be clear, concise, persuasive, and compelling, both philosophically and practically.

We'll return to this next Sunday and can continue in the meantime here on the forum.

Post by "Raphael Raul" of September 9, 2025 at 9:42 PM

Cassius, yes, it was a fascinating, passionate discussion last Sunday on Comparing The Pleasure of A Great Physicist Making A Discovery To the Pleasure of a Lion Eating an Antelope. ...Today I have been preparing for my two art workshops, which are filled to the brim with students. Starting Friday, after completing some errands & organizing my studio, I hope to have some time to write down some thoughts on the discussion and post them here. I will see you Sunday at 12:30 pm for the Epicurean Friends Zoom meeting.

Post by “DaveT” of September 10, 2025 at 10:20 AM

[Cassius](#) and [Raphael Raul](#) I'm looking forward to your further contributions. I confess I'm still somewhat mystified on the attention each of you give to this topic. To me, this topic only matters when outsiders are discussing and judging the behavior of others in contrast to what I understand as the Epicurean focus on the subjective sensations of what we feel and think about. What we feel while living our lives of avoiding pain through actions that create pleasure seems to me, all that should matter to us.

Post by “Cassius” of September 10, 2025 at 11:05 AM

Dave:

Definitely in the end for each of us what matters is knowing the right answer. But there's a lot of trash to cut through for most of us before getting to that, and to a significant extent - going all the way back to Lucretius and go Epicurus himself, the task of gaining new like-minded friends means "creating" them by lifting the trash away that accumulates around all of us.

I was relistening to our Emily Austin interview yesterday and she made the point: there is no better way to understand something than to teach it.

And teaching it requires us to cut through the fog that surrounded it in common culture.

Post by “Raphael Raul” of September 13, 2025 at 6:34 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4703-comparing-the-pleasure-of-a-great-physicist-making-a-discovery-to-the-pleasure-o/>

Again, it was a fascinating and even passionate discussion last Sunday on the topic of "Comparing The Pleasure of A Great Physicist Making A Discovery To the Pleasure of a Lion Eating an Antelope or Lamb." Some people have stated in the threads and the discussion that this topic has already been argued and resolved. This debate is far from being resolved, especially the argument that I am presenting here, which will never be definitively determined and will always be debated in different times and epochs, as it has been throughout history, since the ancient Greeks in the Agora of Athens. My final thoughts on this topic will likely be highly controversial for some and even spark a firestorm of debate, but debate is a good thing.

For me, the goal of life is Pleasure, but the guide of life is "Reason." Prudence, as Epicurus stated, is even more important than philosophy." Why is that? It is because prudence is the use of Reason to sort out what is best for one. One can live well without having read any philosophy if they have Prudence. If they are Reasonable people, they can sort out among the many choices what is beneficial for their life. I have personally met illiterate country folk with "common sense" as they call it, who have used Prudence (reason) to navigate skillfully through life, and have known highly educated individuals who have made continuous bad choices. It seems that higher education and academic philosophy did not help them; maybe Prudence would have.

My point here is that with reason we make personal choices, but as a society, "we use reason collectively to decide what is more valuable than other things." Therefore, we make collective "valuations" that may deem one activity "higher" in nature than another, or using another term, "worthier of our time and energy", and seek as a society to promote those worthier activities that we collectively decide are more beneficial to it, such as the study of history, science, philosophy, and the arts over playing pinball, throwing darts in pubs, or watching sitcoms all night. Yes, some individuals have no interest or receive Pleasure from reading history, studying science and philosophy, or composing music and creating paintings. Their pleasures are of the ones mentioned above, and I respect their interests and their pleasures. I also enjoy, in my youth, at times, playing pinball, darts in bars, and watching a sitcom or two. I am dating myself here, but I still enjoy viewing, once in a while, the 1950s sitcom "The HoneyMooners", for relaxation and laughter. ...Laughter is good; it oxygenates the brain.

As understood, in Epicurean philosophy, there are **no objectively higher activities judged collectively as superior, independent of individual experience**. Epicurus held that all value—including the value of activities—is grounded in the individual's own feelings of pleasure and pain, not in an external or collective hierarchy. So, this is my criticism of what we know of Epicurean philosophy, as scholars estimate that **less than 1% of Epicurus' total written works have survived**. And it is possible that on the other 99% of the writings that we do not have, he may have refined this view.

However, I am not going to fall into the pit of subjectivism and relativism that leads to sophistry by saying that playing pinball, darts in bars, and watching sitcoms all night, though pleasurable,

are all equally valuable as reading history, studying science and philosophy, or appreciating art, such as painting, music, and poetry, and all the other intellectual and artistic activities. This subjective vs objective argument is an old debate dating back around 2,300 years to ancient Greece between Socrates and the Sophists. Plato's dialogue that best captures the problem of **subjectivism versus objective truths** is the "**Republic**", especially in Books V-VII, where Socrates contrasts the world of changing opinions and appearances (doxa/subjectivism) with the world of immutable, objective knowledge (episteme) accessed through reason.

Ironically, Epicurus develops a whole philosophical system using proto-scientific ideas that are objectively outside of the larger society's views or understanding. Yet, Epicureans hold that objective valuations cannot be made is a contradiction. Epicurus developed theories of atoms and void, first proposed by Democritus, which were not observable with instruments in his time. These are attempts at objective assertions, scientific assertions, of the world. However, Epicureans maintain that all is subjective, as I was made aware of during our discussion, and objective valuations cannot be made. What Epicureans hold is in contradiction to what Epicurus actually did, which was to attempt to arrive at ideas that he developed through objective reasoning.

Finally, as Socrates warned, subjectivism can lead to social confusion and chaos. In the West, we are experiencing the consequences of overemphasizing subjectivism and relativism, due to many factors, which have led to confusion and doubt about what a man and a woman are, and that one can become the other by just "identifying" with it (subjectivism), and ignoring what science knows about DNA. Our Western heritage and its values have been slowly evaporating. Values that originated in ancient Greece, such as the use of reason and the development of a non-supernatural view of the world and universe, led to philosophy and science. Suppose we, as a society, do not return to evaluating and recognizing the worth of Western Civilization's Values, especially that of reason and science; in that case, we will face its ultimate disappearance as other, more passionate, radical, belief-based societies demographically and politically overtake it, as is presently happening in Europe today, with dire consequences for it.

Finally, for me, to restate...the goal of life is Pleasure, but the guide of life is "Reason." Prudence, as Epicurus stated, is even more important than philosophy." For it gives us the ability to guide us to good pleasures. However, the present Epicurean understanding in my mind is limited due to the paucity of Epicurus' own writings, which are considered only 1% of what he wrote. And there seems to be a contradiction between what he attempted to do "objectively" and thus what Epicureans believe, as only "Subjectivity" is possible. Therefore, in my humble opinion, Epicureanism, as understood by Epicureans in our discussion last Sunday, is lacking in evaluating the truly worthy values and activities, such as Albert Einstein's development of the Theory of Relativity, Beethoven's symphonies, and Leonardo Da Vinci's paintings, from what appear to me to be mere distractions, such as darts in bars, pinball, and bingeing on sitcoms all day.

Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2025 at 9:13 PM

Thank you for that post Raphael! You're covering several things and I expect there will be lots of reactions to different parts.

I am inclined to want to focus on what I think is a position we share, which is that Epicurean philosophy does not in fact mean that a life of push-pin is as well spent as a life of enthusiastic pursuit of nuclear research and invention. It's because I believe that as well that I campaign against empty use terms such as "absence of pain" which can either be very profound and essential, or a straight road to decadence and disaster, depending on how (and if) one defines them.

But I think I will start with this one:

[Quote from Raphael Raul](#)

However, Epicureans maintain that all is subjective, as I was made aware of during our discussion, and objective valuations cannot be made. What Epicureans hold is in contradiction to what Epicurus actually did, which was to attempt to arrive at ideas that he developed through objective reasoning.

.. because I think you are exactly right to judge Epicureans and the Epicureans according to the active and engaged lives that they lived, and not according to the head-in-the-sand isolationism which is held up today as the Epicurean ideal.

But the real heart of the question is the role of pleasure vs reason as the guide. I gather you're concerned that it is a problem to hold reason to be a "tool" for happiness, rather than a guide toward happiness. I think the answer to that concern is found in pursuing the same line of thinking that leads you to conclude that a life of pushpins is unacceptable to you.

The ultimate issue is that "reason" alone cannot give you the answer to the question of what you "should" do without first calculating the reasonable course in relation to a goal. And only pleasure and pain can ultimately determine whether a goal is worth pursuing. No amount of reasoning can deliver the positive emotional response that you are looking for in what you are considering to be worthy goals. Only the feeling of pleasure and pain can sort out those questions in the ultimate sense. Yes we must employ reason so we can project the results of our actions based on experience, but no amount of calculation can tell us whether our goals are worth pursuing or not.

That's what I think you are hearing in those who, like Lucretius, are calling "divine pleasure the guide of life." As a guide pleasure does not reject the use of reason or friendship or virtue or any other tool toward reaching the goal, but a perspective that places "nature" firmly in the

driver's seat as to what to pursue and what to avoid has to acknowledge that by nature there is only pleasure and pain as feelings of guidance.

There's of course a lot more to say and I am sure others will say it better, but I think your reaction that you see a problem is much more to be appreciated than a reaction that some might have to the effect that "i'm ok with pushpins as long as I never suffer a moment of pain!"



That attitude is NOT Epicurean.

Post by “Raphael Raul” of September 13, 2025 at 10:16 PM

Good evening, Cassius. I hope you had a good dinner.

Thank you for your thoughtful reply to my post.

I am clarifying this statement you wrote in your post.

"But the real heart of the question is the role of Pleasure vs reason as the guide. I gather you're concerned that it is a problem to hold reason to be a "tool" for happiness, rather than a guide toward happiness."

I just wanted to clarify that

...I hold that the goal of life is Pleasure, but the guide of life is "Reason."

I hold that reason is the tool that guides the Pleasure that we are experiencing, not the other way around.

For example, pleasures come, while eating or drinking, let's say, and while one eats and drinks, one may desire to eat and drink past a reasonable limit. Thus, a reasonable person employs "reason" to decide, "No, I will stop eating and drinking now, because if I continue, I will get drunk and have indigestion later.

So yes, we feel Pleasure, and those pleasures can be good or bad if we do not use reason to decide how far or how much Pleasure we should have.

However, the main argument concerns the almost total subject view that all members held at last Sunday's discussion. The idea that all is subjective and that there is no objectivity possible in making societal valuations.

I am looking forward to tomorrow's Sunday Epicurean discussion.

It is one of the highlights of my Sunday!!!

As well as playing chess with Tau Phi after the discussion.

Good night...

Post by "Cassius" of September 14, 2025 at 6:09 AM

[Quote from Raphael Raul](#)

I hold that reason is the tool that guides the Pleasure that we are experiencing, not the other way around. For example, pleasures come, while eating or drinking, let's say, and while one eats and drinks, one may desire to eat and drink past a reasonable limit. Thus, a reasonable person employs "reason" to decide, "No, I will stop eating and drinking now, because if I continue, I will get drunk and have indigestion later. So yes, we feel Pleasure, and those pleasures can be good or bad if we do not use reason to decide how far or how much Pleasure we should have.

The question of the proper order of priority is why according to Diogenes Laertius Epicurus held that:

"Logic they reject as misleading. For they say it is sufficient for physicists to be guided by what things say of themselves. Thus in The Canon Epicurus says that the tests of truth are the sensations and concepts and the feelings.... Nor is there anything which can refute the sensations. For a similar sensation cannot refute a similar because it is equivalent in validity, nor a dissimilar a dissimilar, for the objects of which they are the criteria are not the same; nor again can reason, for all reason is dependent upon sensations; ... And seeing and hearing are as much facts as feeling pain.

In your examples, the only factor that makes reason useful is that the feeling of pleasure and pain consistently report certain conditions as desirable and others as undesirable. It is not possible through formula and logical assertions alone to conclude that apple pie is good or bad. One piece is frequently good; ten pieces in a row are frequently bad. It is the fact of the result producing pain that we store in memory and retrieve to conclude through reasoning that we should stop after eating one piece. Reasoning is the mechanism through which we predict the future, but it was the original feelings that were gathered by memory and reason that led us to assert the rule of thumb as to how much to eat. And even that rule of thumb remains dependent on circumstances. Five pieces of apple pie in a row would ordinarily create pain, but if you have been starving in a desert for weeks. even more than five pieces may still be enjoyable. Reason is certainly a valuable tool, but circumstances change, and in order of priority pleasure and pain of actual people in actual life take precedence. In Jefferson's phrase, "*the earth belongs to the living.*"

[Quote from Raphael Raul](#)

However, the main argument concerns the almost total subject view that all members held at last Sunday's discussion. The idea that all is subjective and that there is no objectivity possible in making societal valuations.

The goal of establishing the validity and necessity of "objectivity" is exactly what Epicurean canonics is all about, and no one establishes and defends objectivity better than Epicurus. The question is finding a true and real basis for objectivity, one which does not require made-up gods or standards of certainty that are logically impossible to achieve. What you are looking for in rejecting total subjectivism is exactly what Epicurus is doing.

It is Plato and the Stoics (including Cicero in our current discussions) who are the relativists and subjectivists. They assert groundless speculation about eternal virtues and forms as the real truth, but in fact their standards of truth do not exist. There are no eternal standards of right and wrong or laws that apply to all people at all places at all times.

This is where Epicurus saw that it is impossible to live successfully without a proper standard of what is true and real. Although there are no eternal forms or virtues, nature does exist with regularity that is predictable, and that regularity is how we deduce that there are some things that are regularly and even eternally the same in the nature of the atoms and the void. It is Epicurus who properly establishes that some things that are eternal and reliable do exist, and from that eternal nature we observe that nature has given us the feelings of pleasure and pain. We can use reasoning to help us understand the validity of following pleasure and avoiding pain, but in reality nature tells us directly through feeling, and we cannot override what nature gives us. Pleasure and pain are just as real to us as seeing or hearing or touching, no matter how we may try to reason ourselves into believing otherwise.

So Epicurus is not being inconsistent in (1) placing the guidance of nature through pleasure and pain above reason, while at the same time (2) saying that the wise man is going to conduct all his affairs throughout his life using reason. The two go hand in hand, but it is not reason that allows us to experience pleasure and avoid pain, but pleasure and pain which instruct reason on how to employ itself.