

The Lens That Brings Epicurus Into Focus: The "No Limit" Objection To Pleasure, And Epicurus' Response

I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form. - Epicurus

Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing. - Epicurus to Menoeceus

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By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. Epicurus to Menoeceus

For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure. - Epicurus to Menoeceus

The "No Limit" Objection to Pleasure as the Highest Good:

Q: Have pleasure and pain a limit, or are they among the things which admit of more or less?

A. Yes, they are among those which admit of the more... - Plato - Philebus

Therefore the power and the greatness of virtue cannot rise to greater heights, because increase is denied to that which is superlatively great. ... The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect. - Seneca, To Lucilius

Epicurus' Response to the No Limit Argument:

The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together. - PD3

Bodily pleasure does not increase when the pain of want has been removed; after that it only admits of variation. The limit of mental pleasure, however, is reached when we reflect on these bodily pleasures and their related emotions, which used to cause the mind the greatest alarms. - PD18

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? - Torquatus, in Cicero's "On Ends"

And he used to say that those philosophers were right when they said that ... nothing is better than a life of ease, full of, and loaded with, all sorts of pleasures. - Cicero, "In Defense of Publius Sextus"

In most

"enlightened" circles today it is accepted and even required correctness to teach that the universe is not controlled by meddling gods, and that it is foolish to look for a life after death. Thus far Epicurus enters into polite company with flying colors, and he is praised as a genius beyond his time. But what of the Epicurus who said that he "knew not how to conceive the good apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form?"

This pleasure-centered viewpoint is most certainly ****not**** accepted by the enlightened orthodoxy, who hold simplicity and austerity as ends in themselves, and as the watchwords of enlightenment.

And so we come to the third of the [Principal Doctrines](#): "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body nor of mind, nor of both at once." This is interpreted by the enlightened orthodoxy as a call to simplicity and asceticism, rather than to pleasure as the guide of life. The orthodoxy cares not that this upends both the doctrine and the philosophy as a whole, because

orthodoxy is essentially Platonic and Stoic, and looks for that which it finds most amenable to its own views.

But the unperverted function of Doctrine Three has a far different meaning. Just as Doctrine One makes it impossible for religion to appeal to gods as the guide of life, and Doctrine Two makes it impossible to fear punishment after death, Doctrine Three makes it impossible to embrace the prevailing Platonic logical argument that pleasure has no ceiling and therefore cannot serve as the guide of life.

From here I will quote Norman DeWitt, the unorthodox interpreter of Epicurus who has been banished from academic respectability for his willingness to embrace this most controversial of the doctrines of Epicurus:

"Having established body and soul upon a parity, equal partners in life, Epicurus next proceeded to propound a number of paradoxes: first, that limits of pleasure were set by Nature, beyond which no increase was possible; second, that pleasure was one and not many; and third, that continuous pleasure was possible. These new doctrines were the offspring of controversy, because the contrary doctrines had been sponsored by Plato and his followers, who in this instance agreed for the most part with the multitude."

"The first paradox is part of Authorized Doctrine 3, and by this position its prime importance is revealed: 'The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures.' The meaning is plain if the pleasure of eating be taken as an example. Nature is the teacher, as usual, and sets the norm. Hunger is a desire of the first category according to Epicurus: it is both natural and necessary. Where this natural and necessary desire for food exists, the pleasure of satisfying it cannot be exceeded...."

"To the youthful Menoeceus Epicurus writes: 'Plain-tasting foods bring a pleasure equal to that of luxurious diet when once the pain arising from need has been removed. and bread and water afford the very keenest pleasure when one in need of them brings them to his lips.' This is the fixed ceiling for pleasure. which he endeavors to establish in opposition to Plato. who compared the appetitive part of the soul to "a many-headed beast" and held to the opinion that desires increase endlessly and that pleasure defied the fixing of a limit. ..."

"In [the letter to Menoeceus] the doctrine of the basic pleasures and the consequent fullness of pleasure is elaborated: "It is for this that we do everything, to be free from pain and fear, and when we succeed in this, all the tempest of the soul is stilled, the creature feeling no need to go farther as to something lacking and to seek something else by which the good of soul and body shall be made perfect." In speaking of "going farther" and "seeking something more" he refers to the superfluous or merely embellishing pleasures."

(All quotes above from Chapter 12, "The New Hedonism" - Epicurus and His Philosophy by Norman DeWitt)

In closing, consider also Vatican Saying 63: "There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance."

The full gallery of PD3 graphics is here: <https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/gallery/in...e-list/190-pd3/>

Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of December 26, 2021 at 12:24 PM

So, it would seem as if pleasure exists as a function of pain. This is because we know, at one end, no pleasure = 100% pain, and at the other, when we "fill the tank", we have a 100% effective pleasure, and a complete elimination of pain.

It is worth to clarify whether or not this is the point where the natural and necessary desires are fulfilled and we get into the territory of the other desires. Or is there no association/correlation?

So, since pleasure is clearly a function of relieved pain, it's consistent to think that the pleasures obtained after the threshold (of the elimination of evident pain), are also eliminating some pain too, albeit a non-evident one.

From the beginning of this post, Maslow's hierarchy started looming. At this point it seems more relevant, but I won't digress there.

The thing is that, it would seem, the "tank" is not the only place that takes "gas", apparently. There are other places in the "vehicle", less evident than the tank, where there's a capacity to receive gas, while not a necessity for it. A "reserve", would be a good analogy, as this is not needed, but can get you out of trouble. So, having access to fun stuff to do, can help you cope with hunger.

Does this make sense?

This makes sense to me, as this framework seems consistent and helps me to assimilate the PD.

Is anything contrary to any other PD or teaching?

Also... of the pleasures we can find beyond the threshold (of evident pain relieving), it could be smart to learn what pains are they eliminating, for us to gain more control and understanding over our experience. Going psychological here, if there's a pleasure I constantly seek and indulge in (which is, as accepted before, eliminating some pain) but that overall ends up producing me more pain afterwards (think addiction), it would make sense go try and find what is that non evident pain (most likely mental distress) that I'm eliminating with the pleasure,

thus becoming capable of eliminating the vicious cycle in a reasonable manner consistent with the philosophy, rather than brute-forcing yourself out of it without addressing the root cause. What do you think?

Post by “Cassius” of December 26, 2021 at 3:22 PM

[Quote from camotero](#)

So, since pleasure is clearly a function of relieved pain, i

I am going to have to come back later but this is clearly not a full and correct statement of the issue. Some pleasure is indeed such, but much pleasure is not. There is a long discussion of this in Gosling and Taylor and if I recall correctly they show that not even Plato eventually took that position (that all pleasure arises from loss of pain). There is a classic example of the smell of a rose when walking through a garden -- that is clearly pleasurable, but the pleasure does not arise from any kind of pain existing prior to smelling the rose.

As to the gas tank analogy, that arises from there being only two feelings -- the gas in the tank does not derive its essence from the "air" in the tank any more than the air derives its essence from the gas.

Post by “Cassius” of December 26, 2021 at 5:36 PM

Camotero I went looking back in Gosling and Taylor for a succinct summary of this "replenishment" issue but i found that there are a huge number of references to it and the issue is very complex. If you are interested in it I hope you pursue it in detail. but one of the ways we can help each other on the forum here is to save each other time and try to warn them of dead ends.

As G&T state here even Plato gave up on replenishment as the basis of his view of pleasure (which was an attack on it) but the reasons were very abstract and logic-based. Here is one reference, but I am afraid to pursue this to completion would be more than we can easily do without your digging in to it and then bringing up specific points for discussion.

to recognize the fact that not all replenishments are noticed), but they are just as likely to be the basis of Aristotle's dismissal as any reliance on these supposed facts. That the *Philebus* is in the background is perhaps suggested by the fact that Aristotle goes on to say that the view he is opposing starts from a consideration of pleasures of nourishment, which seem to fit the proposed pattern, but not all pleasures are like this. He proceeds to cite pleasures of learning, sensible pleasures of smell and hearing and vision, memories and hopes. All these are found in the *Philebus* and are, it has been suggested (Ch. 7), just the examples which drove Plato from the replenishment model.

11.5.28. (d) 1174a13–b14. This is an obscure discussion where Aristotle proposes to embark on his account of the nature of pleasure. He starts by declaring pleasure to be complete for any given time, like sight, and in contrast to movements or processes of coming-to-be something. This relies on a contrast that Aristotle makes in various places between *kinesis* (movement) and *energeia* (actualization), (for a discussion see Ch. 16), and this in turn might seem to be based on a distinction between different kinds of verb. Aristotle thinks that a verb such as 'see' contrasts with one like 'build' in a variety of significant ways. For instance, 'A sees X' entails 'A has seen X' whereas 'A builds X' does not entail 'A has built X'. As Aristotle brings out (1174b11), the

Also, I realize that clip is about Plato and Aristotle rejecting the replenishment theory rather than Epicurus I would argue that these reasons apply even more strongly to Epicurus.

And I think this may be an example of starting point for analysis. If I recall, DeWitt hardly at all, if at all, goes down this rabbit hole, and someone starting with DeWitt would not likely be too concerned about it. I don't say this as criticism of your comments, but as part of a constant lookout to find news ways to help people more efficiently.

Have you read deWitt, and did you find something in that which led you to entertain the replenishment angle? If so that would be very helpful for me to know as it may help in advising others in the future.

Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of December 26, 2021 at 11:09 PM

I read DeWitt a while back; I tend to forget the specifics of it, like whether or not he wrote about pleasure being replenished to the limit set by existing pains; I always go back to it when I get stuck with something, which I'll do now.

I'm concerned because I'm reading now the PDs as the closing text of Diogenes Laertius's work, as is suggested in the core texts' reading list, and some things are not making sense, or at least don't seem as applicable as I'd expect, which is my main goal (applicability) at this stage.

Should I read something else before I keep going down these PDs?

I guess your point is (or at least that's what I interpret), and I take it well, at this point don't over analyze, and I totally and honestly agree, since it's not taking me anywhere. Thus, I simplify my approach... Are you, or somebody, so kind as to tell me why is the *quantity* of pleasure relevant to us; and how is this particular doctrine helpful? (Other than recommending

you to believe that for pain to go away you must seek pleasure).

Post by “Don” of December 27, 2021 at 12:36 AM

[Quote from camotero](#)

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I can appreciate your frustration, but I encourage you to stick with the PDs. There's only 40 of them (and I would argue several of them need to be read together. The original text wasn't divided into 40 items, there were continuous paragraphs). They're building blocks. I'd also encourage you to ask questions about specific PDs in that section of the forum.

I also fully appreciate your looking for direct applicability. Some of the PDs can be put into practice, others need more context. One big overall takeaway is that our choices and rejections are our own responsibility. Not even Epicurus can tell us what to do in every situation. It is up to us to weigh the consequences and decide.

Keep reading! Keep asking questions!! Your curiosity is welcomed!

Post by “Godfrey” of December 27, 2021 at 1:10 AM

[Quote from camotero](#)

So, it would seem as if pleasure exists as a function of pain.

This is incorrect. Pleasure and pain are more accurately thought of as dichotomous or binary; perhaps better still as part of an affective circumplex as discussed elsewhere on the forum. Most importantly though, they are the two components of the faculty of Feelings, and this faculty serves as a guiding function. As Cassius points out, PD3 is a response to the argument

of rival philosophers that pleasure can't be the *telos* because it has no limit. Epicurus in PD3 gives that limit. The mistake that people make is to interpret this *philosophical argument* (which it is) as *practical advice* (which it isn't).

Quote from camotero

~~...it could be smart to learn what pains are they eliminating, for us to gain more control and understanding over our experience. Going psychological here, if there's a pleasure I constantly seek and indulge in (which is, as accepted before, eliminating some pain) but that overall ends up producing me more pain afterwards (think addiction), it would make sense go try and find what is that non evident pain (most likely mental distress) **or the vain desire** that I'm eliminating with the pleasure, thus becoming capable of eliminating the vicious cycle in a reasonable manner consistent with the philosophy, rather than brute-forcing yourself out of it without addressing the root cause. What do you think?~~

I think that what you're describing here is important as it is one aspect of the guiding function (noting that I've struck out some of the quote and added a bit). But you must also be aware of pleasures which are giving you positive guidance, and the niggling unnoticed pains that are by themselves giving negative guidance, as well as vain desires that are contributing to your pain. Following pleasure generally leads toward health and growth, following pain generally leads toward disease and atrophy. But the above edited quote is a good example of the fact that while all pleasures are "good", not all are to be chosen as per the Letter to Menoikeus. And also that ignoring pain is ignoring the guidance of the Feelings. For me, a big part of living this philosophy is being aware, as often as I'm able, of my feelings of pleasure and pain and listening to and evaluating the guidance that they're giving me. But I can't by any means claim to have mastered this!

Post by "Cassius" of December 27, 2021 at 7:23 AM

[Quote from camotero](#)

Should I read something else before I keep going down these PDs?

I agree with Don that it is good to acquaint yourself with the PD s and even the Vatican sayings early on. The lists are short and quick to read.

BUT I firmly think that anyone and everyone would profit from reading DeWitt overview before you worry over the details of any doctrine or think you fully understand any of them. Even the

most straightforward have many subtle implications, and several have no straightforward meaning at all.

And I will go so far as to say that unless the you first read a competent summary, like DeWitt, which acquaints you with the philosophic views Epicurus was working on reforming, most people will come away from reading the Doctrines with a highly distorted view of Epicurus.

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2021 at 7:33 AM

[Quote from camotero](#)

Are you, or somebody, so kind as to tell me why is the quantity of pleasure relevant to us; and how is this particular doctrine helpful? (Other than recommending you to believe that for pain to go away you must seek pleasure).

This is a perfect example of the problem we are discussing - that of understanding the depth of the issues without first having sufficient background.

The issue of quantity of pleasure relates directly to the critical issue of the LIMIT of quantity of pleasure. Plato and others had firmly established (such as in [Philebus](#)) that the "highest good" must have a limit. Plato's argument is that in order for something to be considered "the highest" that thing must be something that cannot be improved - because it has a highest "limit" of which there is no higher - no greater quantity. This is a definitional word game but it makes sense in a definitional way if you think about it.

PD3 therefore refers to the limit of quantity of pleasure - and asserts that that limit is reached when every ounce of your experience is pleasurable (which means, by definition, that all pain has been expelled from your experience).

It is only by identification of this logical limit that Epicurus can defeat the logical argument that pleasure cannot be the highest good since (Plato alleges) pleasure has no limit.

This argument is not familiar to most of us today because we do not read [Philebus](#) and the details of Plato and we do not know of this argument against pleasure being the highest good.

And in my view this is why people go wrong and think that Epicurus has identified some new kind of pleasure that is the highest good - which is not what he is saying at all. But if you don't know why he is talking about a limit of pleasure it is easy to make that mistake and go totally off course - and think that he is identifying tranquility as the goal of life, which is not the case at all. Epicurus never takes the focus off pleasure, but if you think he is doing that in PD3, then

you also conclude that he must be redefining pleasure as equal to tranquility in every respect, which is absurd, but is what many modern writers have concluded.

This - the subtlety of even the third doctrine on the list - is not going to be readily understood by most nonprofessional modern readers because they are not familiar with the argument in [Philebus](#). That's why I assert that it is best to start with DeWitt to acquaint yourself with the issues Epicurus was combatting. And on this specific issue, which relates to the "katastematic" issue, I also urge you to read [Nikolsky](#).

I am glad you raise these points because this is a discussion that needs to happen at the earliest possible stage with every single person who tackles reading Epicurus. And this problem is not limited to the Doctrines - it applies especially to the letter to Menoecus too.

Post by "Cassius" of December 27, 2021 at 9:17 AM

Note: Rather than extend the background research part of this question here, I have set up a thread: [Collecting Ancient Instances of the Argument: "Pleasure Cannot Be The Highest Good Because It Has No Limit"](#)