

On freedom from distress = full pleasure

Post by "Hiram" of March 20, 2019 at 6:10 PM

[https://www.reddit.com/r/Epicureanism/comments/b3eqed/a thought on how freedom from distress can be](https://www.reddit.com/r/Epicureanism/comments/b3eqed/a_thought_on_how_freedom_from_distress_can_be)

Post by "Cassius" of March 20, 2019 at 6:35 PM

Thanks for the link Hiram. I could not resist responding/

What follows is the post, and then my response.

Post:

I confess I have always been a little uncomfortable with the assertion that freedom from discomfort/distress was pretty much the maximum obtainable lasting pleasure, with all the other possible pleasures being a matter of variety, but not offering greater satisfaction. It occurs to me that there might be a way of describing this that makes it much more plausible.

I have only passing personal experience with narcotics (mostly in a legit medial context) but I was impressed by a comment I read about recreational narcotic use some years back. Narcotics, it said, *provide complete satisfaction of ones needs*.

Imagine yourself on a perfect beach, in a comfortable chair, with an excellent drink in your hand. The temperature is perfect, the sun is warm and comfortable, everything is just right. This is nice. Very nice. Note that you are not really doing anything, or being stimulated in any particular way, or even indulging any of your desires. You're simply free of need; free of discomfort, distress, disorder. Everything is just right.

Sure, you'd enjoy getting up to have a nice snack, or to play volleyball, or to flirt with somebody cute. But would this really be any better, or just different?

Given the subtle challenges of translation, I'm willing to accept the possibility that *complete satisfaction of ones needs* might be a very close approximation to that which is now translated as "freedom from distress" or "absence of pain". Maybe this is what they were getting at.

Response by Cassius Amicus:

With all due respect to the original poster, this question is another example of the rabbit hole that people get into when they fail to start at the beginning and take the full context of Epicurean philosophy into account. This isn't hard at all - it is easy - what is described in the beach scene IS an example (one of innumerable variations) of the kind of enjoyable best living that anyone with common sense can see is what Epicurus was talking about.

But it is another aspect of the same problem to think that idle beach scenes are the type of indolence that alone typifies the Epicurean goal of life. As one of the subsequent posters pointed out - life on the beach is utopia and is unsustainable in real life.

What IS sustainable in real life is a a lifestyle that is planned and organized to produce as much pleasure as possible at the cost of only the smallest amount of pain that the particular individual can achieve under his or her own circumstances. That is the Epicurean formula for living over time that signifies the highest life possible and which applies to everyone and all the time.

All this is very easy and straightforward. but most people are understandably under the sway of the academic drumbeat that Epicurus was playing word games with "absence of pain" and intending something mysterious by it. If pleasure and pain are the only two feelings, as they are in Epicurean philosophy, the obviously when your experience is consumed with nothing but pleasure, then pain is totally absent by simple quantitative equivalence. That applies to any and all choices in life, but it's up to us to choose those which give us individually the balance of highest pleasure and least pain that we can accomplish.

The stoic/academic/religious enemies of Epicurus like Cicero knew exactly what they were doing when they came up with misleading arguments about the implications of "absence of pain." I am happy to think that that those miscreants damned themselves to their own miserable emotionless stoic existences.

What is very sad is that they successfully misled so many people along the way.

Post by “michelepinto” of March 21, 2019 at 4:28 AM

I have a three year old boy, when I give him a toy he is happy. My wife and I like to see him happy, so we give him lots of toys. The result: the toys pile up and shortly afterwards they no longer give him any pleasure.

Here is a simple example of why adding pleasure to pleasures is useless, it's definitely better to look for serenity. No boredom like no pain. In the case of my child, play with him, even without any toys.

Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2019 at 5:06 AM

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

Here is a simple example of why adding pleasure to pleasures is useless, it's definitely better to look for serenity. No boredom like no pain. In the case of my child, play with him, even without any toys.

I am not sure that this is exactly your point, but here is what I see your observation meaning:

It is human nature that we take interest in something for a while, but as we become familiar with it we lose interest in it and wish to move to something else. Toys are limited objects of which we soon get our fill. Which is not to say that that interest we take in new toys is not pleasurable and desirable -- it is -- all pleasure is desirable because it is pleasing.

When you say "play with him, even without toys" you are noting that your time with your child is continuously pleasurable to him because you are not a limited object like a toy - you have many and varied and changing facets and your child does not lose interest in you as quickly (hopefully!).

But it is also probably true that every child DOES lose interest in being around his parent (or any single person) eventually. That is what happens when children grow up and make friends of their own - they eventually leave their parents behind.

So I do not see these observations as leading to the conclusion that, because we lose interest in any single pleasure ("toy") over time, the answer is to substitute "serenity" -- which implies that "serenity" is something entirely different from pleasure. In other words I do not think it would make sense to say "because pleasures get old over time we should turn our attention to something that is not pleasure."

I see your observations meaning that we should learn to understand human nature and how the sense of pleasure works. We should learn not seek to invest our time in "toys" which give short term pleasure at considerable cost, but in which we quickly lose interest. We should learn to pursue those activities that give us the most (longest, intense) pleasure, and least pain, during the entire time we are alive, under the terms of our own circumstances.

I think this same issue is what is being discussed in PD9:

"If every pleasure had been capable of accumulation, not only over time but also over the entire body or at least over the principal parts of our nature, then pleasures would never differ

from one another."

Epicurus is pointing out that it is NOT true that any single pleasure is capable of accumulation to the point of consuming the total experience of a person for any length of time. That is simply not human nature - human nature does not work that way, and that if that is obvious to us it was obvious to Epicurus. We should not try to force human nature to work other than how it does. Single pleasurable experiences CANNOT be accumulated in such a way as to stay with us throughout our lives without change, so it is necessary for us to live in realization that we move from one set of experiences to another set of experiences, and to keep our sight on the goal of keeping each set of experiences as tuned to contain as many pleasures and as few pains as possible, throughout our entire life.

So I don't think it can be correct that Epicurus defined the guide of how to live in terms of a single pleasure or attribute ("serenity" or any other single word). Rather, the clear implication of what Epicurus is saying is that all of us have a continuously changing total experience, composed of (hopefully) more pleasures than pains. That would be the goal expressed in Cicero's characterization of the Epicurean best life as being "a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures."

Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2019 at 9:28 AM

Comments from another source but relevant to this discussion:

Poster:

I continue to have a hard time grasping this whole issue of pleasure. It has been drummed into my head for too many years that pleasures are fleeting, unreliable. We are to instead strive for serenity, peace of mind, equanimity, which is a more ascetic, idealistic outlook on life. But your answer to this question, Cassius, is quite helpful to me in my attempt to look at things from a more naturalistic outlook, rather than an idealistic one. I'm not sure why I'm having trouble in completely understanding all the issues involved in living an Epicurean life of pleasure, maybe it's because it's so hard to release the conditioning of past views. But it is pleasurable to think about these things, and quite invigorating, so I guess I am on the right track.

Cassius Amicus:

I think you've covered the bases. It is drummed into us that "pleasure" is a bad word, that it is superficial, fleeting, unworthy of attention. Cicero wrote to the effect that it was too embarrassing to talk about it in the Senate or in "the camp." But Cicero and all these ultra-

establishment guys knew that "pleasure" was not their real enemy. Their real enemy was having people (their subjects/citizens) realize that their own FEELING of pleasure and pain was what Nature gave them as their guide. The Ciceronian establishment doesn't want people to see that they don't need the establishment's gods and the establishments ideas of "virtue" in order to know how to live. And so they narrowed down the definition of pleasure to the most animalistic simplistic versions they could think of sex/drugs/rocknroll or wine/women/song and thereby tried to make the idea of living for please a travesty.

But as Epicurus pointed out ALL feeling of any kind, physical or emotional or "spiritual) is either pleasure or pain, and any "reward" or "satisfaction" or "contentment" or "happiness" of any kind is something we FEEL, and therefore is rightly considered a pleasure just as much as bread and water to a hungry man.

That's why Holly I think that Epicurean philosophy is truly the most revolutionary possible. I don't know enough Marx to understand his interest in it, but I would think that virtually any revolutionist who appeals to his or her people's feelings of what they want to do would find affinity with Epicurus. It's the "establishment" that preaches idealistic "virtue" and the priests who preach "supernatural revealed religion" who Epicurus had in his crosshairs - and remain in his crosshairs if you understand the basics of the philosophy.

And I think that's exactly why the "establishment" view of Epicurus is that he taught that we should "instead strive for serenity, peace of mind, equanimity, which is a more ascetic, idealistic outlook on life."

Can you imagine any better philosophy to keep the sheep mild and passive and ready for shearing? (Well if you answered "Christianity!" I would have a hard time arguing, but Christianity is just one of the religions referenced that Epicurus was attacking in pre-existent form (as discussed by Nietzsche).

Here is a Nietzsche reference to Kant but it applies here directly to what Holly raised: "What destroys a man more quickly than to work, think and feel without inner necessity, without any deep personal desire, without pleasure—as a mere automaton of duty? That is the recipe for *décadence*, and no less for idiocy...."

"A nation goes to pieces when it confounds its duty with the general concept of duty. Nothing works a more complete and penetrating disaster than every "impersonal" duty, every sacrifice before the Moloch of abstraction.—To think that no one has thought of Kant's categorical imperative as dangerous to life!... The theological instinct alone took it under protection!—An action prompted by the life-instinct proves that it is a right action by the amount of pleasure that goes with it: and yet that Nihilist, with his bowels of Christian dogmatism, regarded pleasure as an objection.... What destroys a man more quickly than to work, think and feel without inner necessity, without any deep personal desire, without pleasure—as a mere automaton of duty? That is the recipe for *décadence*, and no less for idiocy...."

F. W. Nietzsche From The Antichrist – 11. (translated by H.L. Mencken)

Also from Antichrist:

The sneakishness of hypocrisy, the secrecy of the conventicle, concepts as black as hell, such as the sacrifice of the innocent, the unio mystica in the drinking of blood, above all, the slowly rekindled fire of revenge, of Chandala revenge—all that sort of thing became master of Rome: the same kind of religion which, in a pre-existent form, Epicurus had combatted. One has but to read Lucretius to know what Epicurus made war upon—not paganism, but “Christianity”, which is to say, the corruption of souls by means of the concepts of guilt, punishment and immortality.—He combatted the subterranean cults, the whole of latent Christianity—to deny immortality was already a form of genuine salvation.—Epicurus had triumphed, and every respectable intellect in Rome was Epicurean—when Paul appeared... Paul, the Chandala hatred of Rome, of “the world”

Cassius:

(1) "I'm not sure why I'm having trouble in completely understanding all the issues involved in living an Epicurean life of pleasure, maybe it's because it's so hard to release the conditioning of past views." <<<<< That's exactly the main reason most of us face, I would contend.

(2) "But it is pleasurable to think about these things, " <<< And that is why I am convinced that the answer to reclaim Epicurus is not dialectical logical discussion and lecturing and classroom instruction. Those are the tools of the Platonists who said no one could enter unless they understood geometry. The way to understand Epicurus is FEELING -- which is what he pointed to as the source of all knowledge - again a word (like pleasure) that needs to be widely understood.

(3) "and quite invigorating," And in fact revolutionary! 😊

(4) "so I guess I am on the right track." Yes I think you are. It's the people who pass over these arguments and don't think that they are important, and who think that all that matters is to "be happy" that are NOT on the right track.

Post by “Cassius” of March 21, 2019 at 9:39 AM

I don't know who put up this video, but it struck me that someone else appreciated that "Feelings" go along with the intensity that is part of the ancient Greek character that Epicurus would have shared in (not sure what language the music is in - there is only one word I understand) -

Post by “michelepinto” of March 21, 2019 at 12:55 PM

First of all: I have always wanted to make these speeches, to bring the philosophy of Epicurus into practice. I'm happy to be here!

Second: unfortunately the language gap is felt and even with Google's help I don't always understand everything.

Then my point is that we can be happy with little, it is not necessary to add other (expensive) pleasures to be happy.

Finally: Cassius, thank you for your valuable considerations.

Post by “Cassius” of March 21, 2019 at 1:20 PM

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

Then my point is that we can be happy with little, it is not necessary to add other (expensive) pleasures to be happy.

I think that is entirely correct, as far as it goes. But I think there is danger in overgeneralization. Yes we can be happy with little, but can we not also be happy with a little more, and a little more, so long as those additions do not come at too high a cost of pain or disturbance? What is the right or best amount? Is simply saying "little" or "least necessary" a good guiding standard?

Here are some points made by Elayne over at FB that apply. Lacking a better way to deal with the issue of multiple places of discussion, I'll just paste. I am bolding a couple of paragraphs that I think are most relevant. Here is the main reason I wanted to paste this:

I suspect these biological differences are behind people saying we should sit and meditate all day for maximum pleasure, or that we need to do ultra marathons. They are trying to generalize inappropriately. If they focus on pleasures instead of on only one way to pleasure, which then turns into an obsession with the path itself, they could have more pleasure.

This topic of habituation to pleasure and sustaining of pleasure is one I have spent a lot of time reading about and observing in myself and in my pediatric practice. I find it fascinating, and also pleasurable to think about! Here are a few concepts that might be of practical use in our efforts to achieve sustained pleasure:

1) Habituation to pleasure, where we stop responding to a specific experience, happens more easily when a pleasure is followed by an extrinsic reward. For example, children do not enjoy reading as much when they are given prizes for reading. This has been extensively studied, and a good summary is in Alfie Kohn's book "Punished by Rewards." It may be due to a human heuristic of assuming that if one must be rewarded for doing something, that something must be unpleasant. If I say "eat all your pie and I'll give you some ice cream", you will likely conclude something is wrong with the pie! Whereas if children choose their activities based on intrinsic pleasure, they are more likely to continue enjoying themselves over the long term. This ties in with Epicurus' emphasis on the importance of freedom!

2) I have observed, although I have not done any studies, that some children in my practice habituate to pleasures quickly (and to pains) and others do not. Some people will forever be thrilled with the same pleasures while others will require more intensity over time. When I was a kid, one summer my grandfather, a man prone to extravagant gestures, found out my sister and I liked cashew nuts. He brought us cans and cans of them over a month long visit. We ate them by the handful every day. By the end of that month my sister was sick of them and to this day has no interest in cashews. I am a slow habituator and still love them just as much. I limit my intake due to the expense and the knowledge that a cashew only diet would make me unhappy eventually due to poor health. ? My take-home here is: get to know yourself, and if you are a parent, your children. Observe closely whether they habituate quickly or not. If they habituate, they will need to rotate pleasures more often to achieve sustained pleasure. An example would be to have a toy library where only 2-3 toys are in use during a week, and then change them out.

3) Back to freedom--there is research that children enjoy toys that allow for multiple uses, and personalization/creativity rather than those which have only a set action. So blocks stay fun longer than a jack in the box.

4) There is research that shows the loss of pleasure, anhedonia, in depression, is not due to absence of pleasure but inability to sustain pleasure. The PFC specifically does not signal the nucleus accumbens, so pleasure is fleeting. It may be that some of us have a natural ability to sustain pleasure due to brain function differences. There is research being done to see if it's possible to treat deficiencies in pleasure through a variety of methods. Personally, I get a long "afterglow" from many simple pleasures, so I don't have to do anything drastic for pleasure.

5) Some people find it necessary to have a strong stimulus. When they eat spicy food, watch a scary movie, or go hang-gliding, their brains release endorphins. This may correspond to being endorphin deficient. Others may find that too intense-- I am one who finds a high level of intensity painful if sustained. So I do not assume that a hang-gliding person didn't try something easier first-- that person is different from me. We do not yet know everything about how to help people activate their own endorphins. Attention to what one is doing, a bit different from traditional mindfulness, does seem to help in many cases. Parents can watch their kids to see if a vigorous stimulus is more pleasurable for a specific child, or if that child enjoys milder stimuli. I think this relates to what Epicurus described as compression of pleasure.

There is not a single pleasure program for a child anymore than for adults. And what works best for a person can change over time. I advise not getting stuck on one specific protocol but experiment instead.

I suspect these biological differences are behind people saying we should sit and meditate all day for maximum pleasure, or that we need to do ultra marathons. They are trying to generalize inappropriately. If they focus on pleasures instead of on only one way to pleasure, which then turns into an obsession with the path itself, they could have more pleasure.

Children also vary in their enjoyment of social/"shared" pleasure. This changes over age as well. On the autism spectrum, they will tend to prefer the toys alone or in parallel play, where they are alongside another child or adult but don't interact much. Others prefer highly social play. Some in small groups or with one person, others in a crowd. This is also something to observe for specific children, to help them understand their pleasure needs.

The human drive for "the new", encouraged by pleasure in novelty, is likely inherent in us because it made us survive and reproduce. We also have pleasure in the familiar-- what has been a proven, safe source of pleasure-- eat those berries which tasted sweet and did not lead to pain, and survive. So both novelty and familiarity are rewarded by pleasure, and to different degrees in different people.

[Graves](#) These examples you've given are very helpful! I wish I had been as wise when I was raising my son, I wouldn't have the nearly as many mistakes by being so rigid.

[Holly](#), oh, I wish I had known those things from the beginning with my own children! I learned from them and from my patients, and I made a whole boatload of mistakes. I am grandmother age now, although I don't have my own grandchildren, and I enjoy being able to help parents see happier ways of doing things.

One of the questions I always ask families when they come in with a behavior problem is "what do you enjoy doing together as a family? What do you enjoy doing together as mother-son, father-son, etc? X (child), what things are most fun for you to do?" It is shocking how many times parents draw a blank on the shared pleasures. And then when they have identified some, it usually turns out they rarely do these pleasurable things.

Before making any other change suggestions, I often ask them to start doing at least one of these shared pleasure activities on a daily basis, even if just for a short time, and not make this contingent/ reward based. This is amazingly effective at restoring good-will among family members, and then it is so much easier to solve problems that are making them unhappy.

Post by "michelepinto" of March 21, 2019 at 2:01 PM

Cassius, I definitively love you!

I have a questions. Since not all the people are the same in their relationship with pleasure, may be Epicurus teaching are good for some kind of people and are not good for a different kind of people?

Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2019 at 2:54 PM

Thanks for the kind words Michele -

That's a very important point and my view is just what Elayne said above. I think what you are getting out is that we all recoil at the realization that not everyone is capable of reaching the same level of success in living pleurably. We all immediately find the apparent inequity unfair, tragic, etc. and we look for an answer as to how the universe can make things right for everyone. I think this issue is much like death -- we all fight against it, and it tears us up when it happens.

But I think what Epicurus is saying is that reality cannot be escaped. The universe is NOT equitable, there is not a divine god or set of ideal forms that allows everyone to reach the same age, or the same standard of life. We can fight against that, we can do our best individually to help those less fortunate, but in the end the universe itself has no mechanism for providing equal levels of happiness for everyone.

Regardless, Epicurus' teachings are for *everyone* because they are based on the nature of all of us as human beings. All of us are born to live as pleurably as we can, whether we succeed

in living to 100 and having huge families and great wealth, or whether we die immediately after childbirth. Nature is not a personal god and does not take personal interest in us - Nature has not designed the universe for us, and it is up to us (and to a significant extent, to unplanned circumstance) as to how we succeed.

But nevertheless the goal of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain is the only goal we all share.

If we are born in tragic circumstances and in great pain for which there is no relief, then the hard reality is that death will turn out to be the best option. But for most of us, in most situations, the reality is not nearly so bleak. We have to work hard for pleasurable living, but for most of us it achievable.

But the key realization is that we all have different circumstances, and that we are all going to find ourselves pursuing pleasure and minimizing pain in different ways. Simplicity is generally (but not always) the best tool. NO tool is "always" the best, and that's why "virtue" in Epicurus is so flexible. No tool is an end in itself., the end is always the "feeling of pleasure" which is the only guide Nature gave us for what to pursue.

This is perfect for the line from book 6 of Lucretius I just quoted in the graphic:

"For when he saw how little would suffice for necessary use, and by what small provisions life might be preserved; that Nature had prepared every thing ready to support mankind; that men abounded with wealth, and were loaded with honor and applause, and happy in their private concerns, in the good character of their children, and yet their minds were restless at home, complaining and lamenting the misery of their condition; he perceived the vessel itself (the mind) was the cause of the calamity, and by the corruption of that, every thing, though ever so good, that was poured into it was tainted: it was full of holes, and run out, and so could never by any means be filled; and whatever it received within, it infected with a stinking smell.

And therefore he purged the mind by true philosophy, and set bounds to our desires and our fears. He laid open to us the chief good, that point of happiness we all aim at, in what it consists, and showed us the direct way that leads to it, and puts us into the straight road to obtain it. He taught what misfortunes commonly attend human life, whether they flow from the laws of nature or from chance, whether from necessity or by accident; and by what means we are to oppose those evils, and strive against them. And he has fully proved that men torment themselves in vain, and are tossed about in a tempestuous ocean of cares to no purpose."