

# Pleasure Is The Guide of Life

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## 1. Explanation

Find out more in our [Ethics Forum](#) and our [Discussion Guide](#). Also, listen to our special [Lucretius Today Podcast Episode 268](#) devoted to this topic.

As if Epicurus had not sufficiently shocked conventional sensibilities by dismissing the existence of supernatural gods, and rejecting the pursuit of virtue as an end in itself, Epicurus tripled down on his philosophic revolution by holding that "Pleasure" is not something disreputable, but is indeed the Guide of life. Pointing out that in a universe in which there are no supernatural gods or absolute standards of virtue, it is still necessary to determine how we should live. Epicurus of course looked to Nature, and saw that Nature gives living beings only Pleasure and Pain by which to determine what to choose and what to avoid

Flagrantly disregarding the wrath of the orthodox, Epicurus proclaimed Nature quite literally gave humanity "nothing" but Pleasure and Pain as guides. While there are many shades of feeling, all of them resolve down to being categorized pleasurable or painful, *and there are no in-between, mixed, or third alternatives*. As Epicurus' biographer summarized, "The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined." (Diogenes Laertius 10:34)

Epicurus did not consider this to be wordplay or wishful thinking, but the foundation on which to erect the highest and best way of life. Epicurean philosophy always looks to Nature rather than to wishful thinking, and so the Epicureans taught: "Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that Nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain? (Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends 1:30)

## 2. Citations

1. As to the definition of Pleasure, see the following citations and the related answer in the [FAQ List](#):

1. Pleasure is one of the feelings, of which there are only two - pleasure and pain:

1. **Diogenes Laertius 10:34** : *"The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined."*
2. **On Ends 1:30** : *"Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?"*

2. Given that there are only two feelings, you are feeling one or the other at all times if you are feeling anything at all:

1. **On Ends 1:38**: *Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence*

*of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."*

3. As to pleasure and pain being separate and unmixed in any particular feeling:
  1. **PD03** : *"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 ."*
4. All of those taken together show that Epicurus did not limit pleasure to what we generally think of as sensory stimulation, but included within pleasure all states of awareness of life that are not felt to be painful. You can see an explicit example of that here in regard to discussion of one's hand in its normal state of affairs, whenever it is not in some affirmative pain:
  1. **On Ends 1:39** : *For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure.*
5. This position is asserted by comparing the conditions of two people who are not in pain, but who are seemingly in very different conditions: A host at a party who is pouring wine to a guest who is drinking it. Here is the example:
  1. **On Ends 2:16** : *"This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?" [Torquatus objects to the question as quibbling but the implicit answer is "yes" based on the condition of "not being thirsty" and "the thirsty man who drinks" both being conditions of pleasure.]*
6. This means that Epicurus was defining all conditions of awareness where pain is not present to be pleasure. It's significant to remember "conditions of awareness" because he is not saying that a rock, which is not feeling pain, to be feeling pleasure. Only the living can feel pleasure or pain, but when you are aware of your condition all of your feelings can be categorized as either painful or pleasurable. You can see this sweeping categorization stated specifically here:
  1. **On Ends 2:9** : Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."
  2. **On Ends 2:11**: Cicero: Still, I replied, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Absolutely the same, indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible."
7. This is how Epicurus can say that the wise man is continuously feeling pleasure, and how he defines the absence of pain as the highest pleasure. He is not talking about the most intense

stimulation, he is talking philosophically about the most pure and complete condition of pleasure where pleasure is defined as a condition where absolutely all pain is gone. The wise man is about to consider this condition to be the most complete pleasure even though it is not the most intense stimulation:

1. **On Ends 1:56** : *By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain. [57] But as we are elated by the blessings to which we look forward, so we delight in those which we call to memory. Fools however are tormented by the recollection of misfortunes; wise men rejoice in keeping fresh the thankful recollection of their past blessings. Now it is in the power of our wills to bury our adversity in almost unbroken forgetfulness, and to agreeably and sweetly remind ourselves of our prosperity. But when we look with penetration and concentration of thought upon things that are past, then, if those things are bad, grief usually ensues, if good, joy.*
  2. **On Ends 1:62** : *But these doctrines may be stated in a certain manner so as not merely to disarm our criticism, but actually to secure our sanction. For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.*
2. As to Pleasure being the guide of life:
1. **Lucretius Book Two [167]:**
    1. *Munro*: "But some in opposition to this, ignorant of matter, believe that nature cannot without the providence of the gods, in such nice conformity to the ways of men, vary the seasons of the year and bring forth crops, aye and all the other things, which **divine pleasure, the guide of life**, prompts men to approach, escorting them in person and enticing them by her fondlings to continue their races through the arts of Venus, that mankind may not come to an end."
    2. *Rouse*: "But some in opposition to this, knowing nothing of matter, believe that without the gods' power nature cannot with so exact conformity to the plans of mankind change the seasons of the year, and produce crops, and in a word all else which **divine pleasure, the guide of life**, persuades men to approach, herself leading them and coaxing them, through the ways of Venus, to beget their generations, that the human race may not come to an end."
    3. *Humphries*: "Some people do not know how matter works. They think that nature needs the will of the gods to fit the seasons of the year so nicely to human needs, to bring to birth the crops And other blessings, which our guide to life, the radiance of pleasure, makes us crave through Venus' agency. "
  2. [Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus \[129\]](#):

1. Bailey: [129] And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good.

### 3. Notes:

1. Major Implications:
  1. Neither supernatural gods nor ideal forms nor logic or rationalism are the guides of life.
  2. There is no higher good than pleasure, no greater evil than pain.
2. *Find out more in our [Ethics Forum](#) and our Wiki.*
3. [Discussion Forum](#)