

By Pleasure We Mean All Experience That Is Not Painful

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1. Explanation

- One might think that stirring philosophers, priests, and politicians to exasperation on the topics of "Gods," and "Virtue" would be enough of a revolution for any one philosopher. But Epicurus's commitment to the truth led him to drive forward to correct the erroneous view of "Pleasure" as well. While virtually everyone before him had properly understood "pleasure" as including sensory stimulation, Epicurus saw this definition as perversely narrow. Epicurus therefore turned to clarifying how the term "pleasure" properly applies to more than sensory stimulation, just as the term "gods" properly applies only to non-supernatural beings.
- Epicurus realized that since Nature has given us only two feelings, if we are alive and feeling anything at all we then are feeling one or the other of the two. That means if we are not feeling pain, what we are feeling is in fact pleasure. This means that "Pleasure" involves much more than the sensory stimulation, which we have been trained by priests and virtue-based philosophers to consider the only meaning of the term. Once we understand that all experiences in life that are not painful are rightly considered to be pleasurable, Epicurus taught us that we can then use the term "Absence of Pain" as conveying exactly the same meaning as "Pleasure." The benefit of this perspective is that Pleasure becomes something that is widely available through a myriad of ways of life that do not require great pain to experience. Pleasure becomes a workable term to describe the goal of life, and a life of continuous pleasure in which pleasures predominate over pain becomes possible for all but the very few who face extreme circumstances (and even they need not face more pain than pleasure indefinitely.)
- Just as we should understand "gods" to refer to living beings who are blessed and imperishable, and "virtue" to refer to actions which lead to happiness, we should understand "pleasure" to refer to all experiences of life that are not painful. Torquatus preserves for us this explanation: "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." (On Ends 1:38)

2. Citations

1. Diogenes Laertius X-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 Book One, 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?"
3. On Ends Book One, 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."
4. On Ends Book One, 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. On Ends Book Two, 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."
6. On Ends, Book Two, 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 greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be." [Plane idem, inquit, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest. (Cic. Fin. 2.11)]
7. On Ends Book Two, 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?"

3. Notes

1. Major Implications:
2. Find out more in our page dedicated to [The Epicurean View of Pleasure](#), our [Ethics Forum](#)