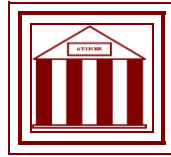


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Epicurean Pleasure

**Andrew Alwood
Assistant Professor
Virginia Commonwealth University
USA**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr
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Epicurean Pleasure

Andrew Alwood

Assistant Professor

Virginia Commonwealth University

USA

Abstract

Hedonists often accept that equal amounts of pleasure are equally valuable. But Epicurus must deny this claim because of the nature of his distinction between static and kinetic pleasures. This paper suggests an understanding of his preferred static pleasure as involving a distinctive hedonic tone or feeling that is intrinsically superior to other pleasurable feelings. This creates a point of similarity between Epicurean hedonism and Mill's qualitative hedonism, since they both endorse a doctrine of higher pleasures; although Epicurus' idiosyncratic claims about the limit of static pleasure in a state free of pain lead him in a different direction.

Keywords:

Introduction

Since hedonism is a theory that locates value only in pleasure, it has been vilified over the course of history for allegedly encouraging such evils as debauchery, excess, and wastefulness. But despite its infamous reputation, the Ancient Greek hedonistic theory of Epicurus emphasizes a moderate and quiet lifestyle. This remarkable incongruence is largely the result of Epicurus' idiosyncratic understanding of the pleasures that he lauds as the only things good in themselves. The true importance of pleasure lies in the tranquil state of being free from mental and physical distress – *ataraxia* and *aponia* – as emphasized in Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus: "When we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated...but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul."¹

Epicurus' idiosyncratic claims lead him to a view rather different from the quantitative hedonism of Jeremy Bentham. On Bentham's view, all pleasures involve a certain kind of feeling that can be quantified and aggregated, with all pleasures being commensurable with each other, and the best life is the one with the most pleasure. Traditional hedonists like Bentham accept (EQUAL): *that equal amounts of pleasure are equally valuable in themselves*. The focus of this paper is on whether and how Epicurus must reject this claim.

Does Epicurus reject (EQUAL)? Arguably, yes. The interest is in why he must do so, and how he might embrace such a commitment. One reason to think he must reject it is that he allegedly accepts that mental pleasures are superior to bodily pleasures. While this certainly appears to force his hand, I think in the end it doesn't commit Epicurus to reject (EQUAL) because (i) mental pleasures might only be instrumentally superior and not intrinsically superior, and (ii) bodily pleasures are in fact given pride of place in key reports of what Epicurus actually said.

Another reason to think Epicurus must reject (EQUAL) is that he is reported to have distinguished *static* pleasures from *kinetic* pleasures. In the end, I do think this requires him to reject (EQUAL). But the point is complicated by the subtle way in which the distinction between static and kinetic pleasures is to be understood. After considering and rejecting some ways of understanding the nature of static pleasure and its differences with kinetic pleasures, I'll make a positive suggestion to make sense of Epicurus' emphasis on the superiority of static pleasure and his recommendation to live a quiet life enjoying simple pleasures.

I'll suggest that static pleasure should be understood as a distinctive kind of experience with a hedonic tone that makes for an objective superiority in value. The crucial feature of this hedonic tone is its *purity*, an intrinsic feature related to the stability of this tranquil state of mind. The resulting view of pleasure and its value makes Epicurus' hedonism more like John Stuart Mill's qualitative hedonism than Bentham's quantitative hedonism. Mill claimed that we should evaluate pleasures not only based on their quantity but also their

¹Letter to Menoeceus (LM), Long and Sedley (LS) 21B5

quality: an intrinsic feature marking some pleasures as ‘higher’ and others ‘lower’ in value.¹ However, Epicurus’ theory will contrast with all forms of hedonism because of its idiosyncratic claims, such as that there is a limit to the amount of static pleasure that can be enjoyed at one time.

Since I’m interested in what Epicurus really thought about pleasure, my discussion will include interpreting our sources of evidence about Epicurus’ account of pleasures and their value. However, I also aim to explore how a hedonist about well-being can deflect the critique that a life of more pleasure is always better on that account and instead praise a quiet lifestyle of simple pleasures

Mental and Bodily Pleasures

The hedonistic theory I’m interested in is a theory about personal well-being or self-interest, as distinct from other kinds of value such as moral goodness. This is the property of a life, or any incremental stage of it, that makes it go well for the one living that life. It is what prudent judgment looks out for.

It’s likely that Epicurus himself advocates hedonism about all types of value, but I’ll restrict my focus to the kind of goodness that makes a life good for the one living it. Hence, I won’t be concerned with Epicurus’ claim that a life of pleasure requires virtue, morality, and justice. Instead, I’ll be focused on his recommendation that you should live a simple, quiet life, because that is what’s best for you. It’s in this context that I am interested in the idea that the intrinsic value of two pleasures that are equal in amount might nonetheless differ, i.e. impact one’s well-being or self-interest to different degrees.

The first reason to suspect that Epicurus has to reject (EQUAL) is his claim that mental pleasures are superior to bodily pleasures. This claim is explicit in the Epicurean inscriptions of Diogenes of Oenoanda, in the context of our fallibility in evaluating our own experiences. He mentions “the superiority of these mental feelings [over bodily ones]”, something which the “wise man” is able to figure out (LS 21V). Clearly, this raises the question of *why* one is superior in kind to the other.

Other sources seem to offer at least a partial answer to this question:

- ❖ “(Epicurus) has a further disagreement with the Cyrenaics: they take bodily pains to be worse than mental ones...but he takes the mental ones to be worse, since the flesh is storm-tossed only in the present, but the soul in past, present, and future” (LS 21R2; DL X.137).²
- ❖ “The body rejoices just so long as it perceives a present pleasure; but the mind perceives both the present pleasure, along with the body, and foresees the one that is coming without allowing the past one to flow

¹See Mill 1863 and Bentham 1789.

²Note that I have added underlining to several quotes in this paper.

away. Hence the wise man will always have a constant supply of tightly-knit pleasures, since the anticipation of pleasures hoped for is united with the recollection of those already experienced” (LS 21T; Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 5.95).

In the first quote, Diogenes Laertius reports that mental pleasures pertain to a wider variety of times than bodily pleasures. In the second quote, Cicero reports in more detail why that is so: the mind can attend to past, present, and future pleasures, using memory and anticipation, whereas the body can only attend to present pleasures.

That’s only a partial answer to the question, however, for it doesn’t specify that mental pleasures are *intrinsically* superior – better in themselves. On the contrary, it even suggests that the superior value of mental pleasures comes in their ability to produce more pleasurable experiences by means of memory and anticipation. Mental pleasures can reproduce more pleasures and make them longer lasting, and therefore they are *instrumentally* better than bodily pleasures.

The mental pleasures are more *stable*, in the sense of lasting longer, being easier to maintain, and being reproducible without external resources. This is related to Epicurus’ appeal to self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*).¹ But nothing is said to make mental pleasures superior in themselves. So, there is no reason here for Epicurus to reject (EQUAL).

Another complication on this point about the relative worth of mental and bodily pleasures is that Epicurus, in his own words, emphasizes some kind of priority of bodily pleasures and sensations.

- ❖ “ ‘For my part I cannot conceive of anything as the good if I remove the pleasures perceived by means of taste and sex and listening to music, and the pleasant motions felt by the eyes through beautiful sights, or any other pleasures which some sensation generates in man as a whole. Certainly it is impossible to say that mental delight is the only good. For a delighted mind, as I understand it, consists in the expectation of all the things I just mentioned – to be of a nature able to acquire them without pain...’” (LS 21 L1; Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 3.41, reporting from Epicurus’ *On the End*).
- ❖ “Epicurus says: ‘The pleasure of the stomach is the beginning and root of all good...’” (LS 21 M; Athenaeus 546F).

In the first quote, Epicurus is reported to say that mental pleasures derive from the expectation (or contemplation) of bodily pleasures and sensations. Bodily pleasures thus are a *sine qua non*, a necessary condition for human

¹In the LM, Epicurus says “We also regard self-sufficiency as a great good, not with the aim of always living off little, but to enable us to live off little if we do not have much...” (LS 21B4).

wellbeing to exist at all. In the second quote, Epicurus is reported to add to this point that all value is grounded in bodily pleasures.¹

One might infer from these two quotes that Epicurus actually thinks that bodily pleasures are intrinsically superior to mental ones. But that would be overly hasty and uncharitable. The kinds of priority given to bodily pleasures here don't necessarily make them more valuable in themselves. The claim about bodily pleasures being the "root" or grounds for all value is stronger than a necessary condition, but it still doesn't imply anything about the relative intrinsic value of bodily and mental pleasures.

From this brief discussion, I conclude that there is no reason to think (based on available textual evidence) that Epicurus is committed to the claim that mental pleasures are intrinsically superior to bodily pleasures. We also have been introduced to the main role that mental pleasures play in a good life: they extend the impact on well-being from bodily pleasures through contemplation. This role is, in fact, supported by other textual evidence such as the following quote from Plutarch:

- ❖ “[According to the Epicureans] The comfortable state of the flesh, and the confident expectation of this, contain the highest and most secure joy for those who are capable of reasoning” (LS 21 N; Plutarch *Against Epicurean happiness* 1089D).

This quote is important for two reasons. First, it identifies both the bodily and mental components of the good life for humans, and second it classifies these together as “the highest and most secure joy” (*ten akrotaten charan kai bebaiotaten*). This provides a nice segue into my next topic, since arguably Plutarch is describing Epicurus' preferred type of pleasure: static pleasures.

Static and Kinetic Pleasures: Some Misunderstandings

The second reason to think that Epicurus has to deny (EQUAL) involves the distinction between *static* and *kinetic* pleasures. In some way, the static pleasures are emphasized more than the kinetic in Epicurus' axiology. However, the difference in their importance requires explanation, and this is complicated by the subtle contrast that is supposed to distinguish these two pleasures in the first place. Since it is easy to be misled, we should proceed carefully.

A first, infamous misunderstanding can be found in Cicero. He essentially equates kinetic pleasures with sensory ones and thereby settles static pleasures as states devoid of sensation. This is what leads him later to criticize Epicureans for using one word 'pleasure' to refer to two different things: pleasurable sensations and a state that lacks painful and pleasant sensations.

¹Also relevant is LS 21U, where Cicero's Epicurean speaker admits that the "source" of mental pleasures are bodily pleasures but maintains that mental pleasures are better.

But a more careful inspection of what his Epicurean speaker, Torquatus, actually says reveals that static pleasure itself involves some kind of feeling, and this is also supported by independent textual evidence.

Here is the Epicurean speaker introducing a distinction in pleasures:

- ❖ “We do not simply pursue the sort of pleasure which has a natural tendency to produce sweet and agreeable sensation in us: rather, the pleasure we deem greatest is that which is felt when all pain is removed...Thus Epicurus did not hold that there was some halfway state between pain and pleasure. Rather, that very state which some deem halfway, namely the absence of all pain, he held not only to be true pleasure, but the highest pleasure” (Cicero *On Moral Ends* 37-8).¹

Although the speaker mentions sensations to draw the contrast, he also is explicit to say that we feel or perceive (*percipitur*) pleasure when all pain is removed. Indeed, he also says that “whoever is to any degree conscious of how he is feeling must to that extent be either in pleasure or pain” and that “we take delight (*gaudemus*) in that very liberation and release from all that is distressing...(and) everything in which one takes delight is a pleasure” (Cicero *On Moral Ends* 37).

Independent sources back up this more accurate conception of static pleasure as a conscious experience that necessarily involves pleasant sensations, perceptions, or feelings. We know from Epicurus’ Letter to Menoeceus that a live, conscious human will always feel some level of pleasure or pain, and also that “all good and bad lie in sense experience” (LM 124). We also know from his Letter to Herodotus that “so long as the soul is present...perception never ceases” (DL X.64-6). Additionally, it is clear that the quotes in the previous section about the priority of sensory pleasures and pains also push back against Cicero’s misunderstanding static pleasures as divorced from sensation.

Therefore, we shouldn’t equate static pleasure with an unfeeling state. Instead, it must involve a feeling of enjoyment or delight associated with the freedom from pain. Cicero’s major philosophical mistake about Epicurean static pleasure is that he implicitly understands it as a kind of *apatheia*, a state devoid of feeling.² But that’s overtly not the Epicurean source of value but rather that of the Stoics. Epicurus would likely classify a state devoid of feeling as death or at least unconsciousness. Instead, he lauds a certain kind of feeling as the source of the best value.³

¹Translated by Raphael Woolf

²For a fuller discussion of Cicero’s mistakes about Epicurean accounts of pleasure, see Gosling and Taylor chp 19. I agree with Cooper 2012, p. 232 on the nature of Cicero’s mistake here about lack of feeling.

³The difference between feeling, sensation, and perception is important for a fuller understanding of Epicurean philosophy. However, I will proceed to talk about the feeling of static pleasure without worrying about how that differs from sensation or perception.

What kind of feeling is involved with static pleasure? Here, there is another kind of misunderstanding to be avoided. John Cooper emphasizes in his account of the distinction between Epicurus' static and kinetic pleasure that these are not *kinds* of pleasure at all but rather different conditions in which a single kind of feeling is produced.¹ Cooper is surely correct in thinking that we shouldn't trust the suggestion from Cicero that there really are two *genera* here (static, kinetic) mistakenly referred to with one word 'pleasure', but why does he add that pleasure is just one single type of feeling? Even if he is also correct that the main contrast (between static and kinetic) is between the causal circumstances or the objects of pleasure, again there is no reason given to think it is one feeling for both pleasures. As is commonly known, the pleasures of reading and the pleasures of eating feel quite differently, and there are innumerable other sorts of feelings that can be involved. The category of pleasurable experiences is full of heterogeneous feeling tones. So, why not allow that static pleasures can feel differently from kinetic ones?

A reason supporting my suggestion (that there are different feelings involved) is that Cooper's claimed single feeling of pleasure would leave Epicurus without any way of distinguishing the differing values of static and kinetic pleasures on hedonistic grounds. Static pleasure is supposed to be superior in value, and the only hedonistic explanation available for this difference has to come from the nature of pleasure, which Cooper agrees essentially involves feeling. If the difference in value doesn't derive from a difference in feeling, and instead supervenes solely on the different cause or object of pleasure, then hedonism loses the debate over explaining the source of value.² A true hedonist must say that it is the pleasantness of pleasure that makes it as valuable as it is. The implication is that Epicurus needs to say that static pleasure involves a recognizably different feeling than do kinetic pleasures, if he is to remain a true hedonist, and thus explain all value in terms of feeling and sensation, while differentiating the intrinsic values of static and kinetic pleasures.

Cooper's interpretation would seem to classify Epicurean hedonism as a version of quantitative hedonism, like Bentham's hedonism, and thus commit it to (EQUAL) and the commensurability of pleasures. But once we allow that static pleasures can feel differently than kinetic ones, that opens the way to reject parts of Bentham's view in favor of a Millian qualitative hedonism.

A Positive Suggestion about Static Pleasure

Here is where I would like to suggest an account of static pleasure that both makes sense of our textual sources and also proves of interest to the contemporary debate regarding hedonism as a theory of well-being. I think

¹See Cooper 2012 chp 5, p. 232-3, and also Cooper 1999 chp 22, p. 512.

²See Crisp 2013, sec. 4.1, for his distinction of 'explanatory hedonism' on which what makes pleasure valuable is its pleasantness. This seems to be the most interesting philosophical thesis in normative hedonism.

Epicurus is committed to a doctrine of higher and lower pleasures similar in outline to that of Mill, although Epicurean higher pleasures are those involved with freedom from pain and distress rather than Mill's claim that it is "the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments" that count as higher pleasures.¹

My suggestion, in short, is that static pleasure involves a distinctive kind of feeling, a "hedonic tone" in contemporary parlance, that is naturally produced in a human mind that is consciously aware of (i) having satisfied all desires, (ii) having eliminated all false beliefs about what one needs or what one should value, and (iii) appreciating the facts that one is healthy and without pain, that one's necessary desires are easy to satisfy, and that one has no need to fear or be in distress. Thus, static pleasure is a state of mind that feels good in appreciating a healthy and stable condition that needs nothing.

There is textual evidence for thinking Epicurus is committed to higher pleasures. He uses such phrasing himself when he tells Menoeceus that bread and water can produce "the highest pleasure" (*ten akrotaten hedonen*).² Cicero also uses this phrase (*summam voluptatem*) to express Epicurus' view on pleasure, and Plutarch, as seen above, refers to "the highest and most secure joy" (*ten akrotaten charan kai bebaiotaten*).³ My suggestion fills out this appeal to highest pleasure by adding detail about which pleasure that is: it is the pleasant feeling naturally produced by attending to one's state of needing nothing. This essentially involves *ataraxia* (freedom from mental disturbance) and *aponia* (freedom from pain) in that it involves the true judgments that one's mind and body is free of distress. But it is not merely negatively characterized by what it lacks; instead, the claim is that recognizing that one is free of pain and distress feels good, by nature and thus of necessity.⁴ There indeed is no middle state between pleasure and pain; what some would call the middle state is really a state of feeling pleasure.⁵

Kinetic pleasures, by contrast, are those involved with satisfying desires or varying a conscious state that already is enjoying static pleasure. Sensory pleasures involved with eating and drinking are thus paradigm examples, but kinetic pleasures are not defined as sensations.⁶ Indeed, on the one hand, alleviating mental distress can count as kinetic pleasure even though it isn't sensory, and on the other hand static pleasure itself can involve sensations.

¹Mill 2.4

²LM, line 31

³Cicero *On Final Ends* I, paragraph 38.

⁴This claim seems to be a point of interpretive agreement with Cooper 1999, p. 496, "it is a natural, inevitable fact about our physical constitution that when anyone is in that condition he or she experiences some pleasurable feeling...."

⁵One might worry that my suggestion forces some kind of middle state in which one lacks some part of the conditions specified for enjoying static pleasure, e.g. still has some false beliefs or fails to believe that future desires will easily be satisfied. However, any failure to meet those conditions will be distressing and so will actually be a state of pain, broadly conceived.

⁶So, Cicero isn't wrong to have his Epicurean speaker say that a quenched thirst involves static pleasure and the pleasure of the actual quenching is kinetic. See LS 21Q.

There is no problem in principle with a state of mind enjoying both static and kinetic pleasures at a single time, although any kinetic pleasures that bring along pain would spoil static pleasure.

A major obstacle to any conception of static pleasure on which it involves feeling or sensation is that feelings and sensations can be quantified. Indeed, the most familiar kind of hedonism nowadays, Bentham's hedonism, is one that says a life is always improved by adding more amounts of pleasure to it. I say this is an obstacle because Epicurus certainly would reject Bentham's claim as well as the very basis of quantifying pleasures. One of his idiosyncratic claims about the good life is that there is a limit to pleasure and thus also a limit to how well one can live. The limit is the state of being free of all pain and distress.

- ❖ “The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures” (LS 21C; Epicurus *Principal doctrines* 3).
- ❖ “The pleasure in the flesh does not increase when once the pain of need has been removed, but it is only varied. And the limit of pleasure in the mind is produced by rationalizing those very things and their congeners which used to present the mind with its greatest fears” (LS 21E; Epicurus *Principal doctrines* 18).

The obstacle presented by Epicurus' limit is clear. If static pleasure is a feeling, and if feelings can be more or less intense and can last for shorter or longer periods of time, then static pleasure can be measured in terms of intensity and duration. But then a life with more static pleasure should be more desirable than one with less, contra the appeal to a limit.

This obstacle has been overlooked even by commentators who recognize that static pleasure must involve some kind of feeling. Terence Irwin agrees that Cicero was probably wrong to identify static pleasure merely negatively, as a state devoid of pain, since it is instead “the pleasure we take in being free of pain and anxiety” that Epicurus lauds.¹ But Irwin mistakenly interprets Epicurus as defending the superior value of static pleasure over kinetic pleasure by saying that the tranquil lifestyle produces a greater quantity of pleasure: “the quantity of static pleasure is great enough to make our life pleasanter than it would be if we pursued kinetic pleasures more vigorously.”² This runs right into the obstacle noted here, for if static pleasure is conceived of as quantifiable, then more static pleasure should be better than worse, contra Epicurus' claim that there is a limit.

If static pleasure were instead characterized merely negatively, as a state with no pain, it would be easier to make sense of the limit: once all pain is gone, one has achieved the maximum static pleasure. It doesn't make sense to quantify static pleasure on such a view; you either have it or you don't. But notice that even on this view it does make sense to say that it is better to have

¹See Irwin 2011 sec. 154, p. 272.

²See Irwin 2011, p. 271.

static pleasure for a longer rather than shorter period of time. While Epicurus does commit himself to the claim that a longer lasting pleasure need not be better for that reason, it is difficult to see how that claim could be maintained on any plausible view.¹ To make his view plausible, we must amend it to allow that longer lasting experiences of static pleasure are better. That still leaves the more interesting challenge about whether it makes sense to talk of the intensity of static pleasure.

So, the obstacle for my suggested view of static pleasure is that, since it involves a feeling, that feeling should be able to be more or less intensely felt. However, I think this obstacle can be overcome by denying that inference. Recall that Epicurus lauds a quiet life filled with moderate pleasures. The feeling that he thinks is naturally produced by attending to one's healthy state of needing nothing must necessarily be mild. Even though we might commonsensically think that one could be intensely appreciative of the fact that one needs nothing, Epicurus can plausibly categorize such intensity of feeling as a kinetic pleasure that adds feeling or sensation to vary one's conscious state. That's not inherently implausible or problematic, and so it helps my suggested interpretation of Epicurus get past this obstacle about the relative intensity of static pleasure. Epicurus must think, on my suggested view, that the static pleasure naturally generated by the conditions listed above (desires satisfied, false beliefs eliminated, true beliefs internalized) is essentially mild and therefore does not permit increases in intensity.

Furthermore, Epicurus would reject the entire approach of Bentham's quantitative hedonism. Static pleasure has to be intrinsically superior to kinetic. Surely, kinetic pleasures can be measured by their intensity, but for someone enjoying static pleasure at the limit of no pain, more pleasure won't increase well-being. It isn't *more pleasure* that one should pursue in life. Instead, one should pursue the pleasures that are *more pure*.

The most pure pleasure is the static pleasure I've been describing. Its purity consists in the recognition of the absence of desire as well as the expectation that future desires (which cannot be eliminated) will be easily satisfied. Purity, in this context, marks the freedom of distress that is inevitable with desire.² Most kinetic pleasures are thus inherently impure because they involve desires such as hunger and thirst. The more intense the desire involved, the less pure the kinetic pleasure. My suggestion would have Epicurus advocating us to pursue the more pure pleasures rather than a greater quantity of pleasures.

Let me be clear that the purity of static pleasure is an intrinsic feature, even though it is related to the extrinsic feature that I earlier called stability. A pleasure is stable to the degree that it is easily maintained, and thus to the degree that it imparts risk of pain, e.g. by discouraging or encouraging desire. Some kinetic pleasures are unstable (e.g. those of the profligates that Epicurus warns of in LM) precisely because they engender false beliefs about needing

¹"Infinite time and finite time contain equal pleasure..." (LS 24C; *Principal Doctrines* 19).

²Compare Cooper 2012, p. 231 and 237.

more pleasure, the desirability of gaining more intense pleasures, or they simply cause one to desire unnecessary things. Stability and instability of pleasures is an extrinsic feature because it pertains to other things such as desire, risk of pain, and future states of pleasure or pain. Static pleasure is the most stable because it involves the least risk of pain, it discourages desire, and it is easy to maintain.

The purity of static pleasure, on the other hand, is an intrinsic feature involved with the pleasant perception that all is well and will continue to remain that way. Both the perception of easy maintenance (intrinsic purity) and the fact of easy maintenance (extrinsic stability) contribute to the superior value of static pleasure. But its intrinsic superiority derives solely from the pure feeling of static pleasure. This is compatible with the hedonist's explanation of value, since purity is intrinsic to the pleasant feeling that constitutes static pleasure.

The feeling of static pleasure isn't separate from the awareness with which I defined static pleasure. The awareness of needing nothing itself feels good.

My suggested understanding of Epicurean pleasures has it that the most valuable thing for an individual's wellbeing is the particular feeling of static pleasure. It is not freedom of pain itself that matters, but rather the enjoyable appreciation of such freedom. Static pleasure is the most pure form of pleasure in that it is not contaminated by any painful sensations, attitudes, or mental distress. It is not distracted by exciting feelings that bring risk of pain. Moreover, it arises naturally if no kind of pain or distress holds it back. It also is stable and self-perpetuating; it is as far as possible from being at risk of devolving back into distress and pain.

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