



XVII: ON PAIN & PLEASURE

*“The day a man becomes superior to pleasure, he
will also be superior to pain.”*

Seneca

Today’s pain and pleasure are brought to you by the scattered thoughts of Epicurus, Seneca, Schopenhauer and Pascal.

The Highest Pleasure

The good name of Epicurus is one that is commonly misused. The term *Epicurean* is often paired with luxury, expensive dining, fine wine, indulgence, greed, gluttony, and unbridled hedonism. Once you actually read Epicurus — the best segments I’ve found are in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* — you quickly realize this is pretty much the opposite of what he was advocating.

One could say he was a hedonist in the sense that pleasure is the goal of life, but his definition of pleasure had nothing to do with luxury. To him, pleasure was *aponia* and *ataraxia* — the absence of physical and mental pain, a calm mind, tranquility, a lack of fear. The simple things.

Above all, you could reduce Epicurus’ point of view to the following statement:

The highest pleasure we can hope for is the painless state.

This is kind of...depressing? The best we can hope for is to not be in pain? Enjoying the moments when all is well is as good as life gets?

Yet the more you think about it, it's true.

Compare the pain of a toothache to the not-pain of a not-toothache. We feel the pain intensely. We don't feel the not-pain at all.

This applies to pretty much anything related to health. There is either pain or there isn't.

We feel pain more intensely than we feel pleasure. You learn this when you study behavioral finance, the concept of loss aversion or Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory, which states that the emotional impact of a loss is twice as strong as the emotional impact of gaining that same thing.

The logical extension of this?

The more possessions you own, the more worries you have, or as one of our generation's deceased philosopher-kings put it: *More money, more problems.*

This is because the more you own, the greater your fear of loss. This fear of loss breeds anxiety and causes you to lose your peace.

Hence why so many philosophers and saints shun material possessions. It's not just moral grandstanding or virtue signaling in the form of asceticism. The practice has sound logical backing. Seneca writes well about this, the superfluous and the necessary: "Utility measures our needs; but by what

standard can you check the superfluous? It is for this reason that men sink themselves in pleasures, and they cannot do without them when once they have become accustomed to them, and for this reason they are most wretched, because they have reached such a pass that what was once superfluous to them has become indispensable. And so they are the slaves of their pleasures instead of enjoying them; they even love their own ills — and that is the worst ill of all! Then it is that the height of unhappiness is reached, when men are not only attracted, but even pleased, by shameful things, and when there is no longer any room for a cure, now that those things which once were vices have become habits.”

The Misery of the Rich

This whole idea — the superfluous becoming the indispensable — is why the wealthy are no less miserable than the poor, and are actually *more* so when measured by suicide rates. If you’re accustomed to five-star luxury at every turn, there is a lot of room for disappointment whenever one of the tiny details inevitably goes wrong. If you’re used to the bare minimum, there is no room for disappointment.

One of Seneca’s most famous quotes is along these same lines: “If you live according to nature, you will never be poor; if you live according to opinion, you will never be rich.”

He goes on to provide a framework for determining whether something is worth pursuing: “Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping-point. The false has no limits. When you are travelling on a road, there must be an end; but when astray, your wanderings are limitless. Recall your steps, therefore, from idle things, and when you would know whether that which you seek is

based upon a natural or upon a misleading desire, consider whether it can stop at any definite point. If you find, after having travelled far, that there is a more distant goal always in view, you may be sure that this condition is contrary to nature.”

That criterion is one worth using today. Essentially, if something has no limit, it will never truly bring you happiness. You will always crave more. That could be money, fame, social media likes, followers, clothes, jewelry, cars, and so on. *The false has no limits. If there is a more distant goal always in view, you may be sure that this condition is contrary to nature.* We never seem to be content with what we have. As a great philosopher wrote in his book *Blind Spots*, the problem with ambition is that it has no rearview mirror.

Desire Versus Boredom

Next, we have something Schopenhauer wrote which altered my entire worldview: the idea that human life consists of nothing more than a pendulum swinging back and forth between desire and boredom.

He wasn't the first to think of this. Before him, I can think of Pascal, and realistically, both Buddhism and Hinduism are based on some variation of the idea that *attachment is the root of all suffering*, or that all suffering stems from desire; thus, life is suffering, and suffering is unavoidable.

Schopenhauer is often viewed as a pessimist, but the truth is that he is no more pessimistic than these Eastern religions, nor is he any more pessimistic than the Christian doctrine of original sin. His view is that the will of man, the will being what drives us to do anything, is an empty, vain, aimless

striving. We want something, we get it, and then we immediately become bored with it, wanting something new, a process we repeat until we die: “Now the nature of man consists in the fact that his will strives, is satisfied, strives anew, and so on and on; in fact his happiness and well-being consist only in the transition from desire to satisfaction, and from this to a fresh desire, such transition going forward rapidly. For the non-appearance of satisfaction is suffering; the empty longing for a new desire is languor, boredom...Hence life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents.”

We just can't stop wanting things. We can't turn off our endless desires, and this is what causes man to be in a constant state of either pain (from unfulfilled desire) or boredom.

Killing Time

What's so bad about boredom, you may ask? Schopenhauer emphasizes it as *anything but an evil to be thought of lightly* in this chillingly accurate depiction of life:

“It is worth noting that, as soon as want and suffering give man a relaxation, boredom is at once so near that he necessarily requires diversion and amusement. The striving after existence is what occupies all living things, and keeps them in motion. When existence is assured to them, they do not know what to do with it. Therefore, the second thing that sets them in motion is the effort to get rid of the burden of existence, to make it no longer felt, to ‘kill time,’ in other words, to escape from boredom.”

“...Accordingly we see that almost all men, secure from want and cares, are now a burden to themselves, after having finally cast off all other burdens. They regard as a gain every hour that is got through, and hence every deduction from that very life, whose maintenance as long as possible has till then been the object of all their efforts. Boredom is anything but an evil to be thought of lightly; ultimately it depicts on the countenance real despair. It causes beings who love one another as little as men do, to seek one another so much, and thus becomes the source of sociability...The strict penitentiary system of Philadelphia makes mere boredom an instrument of punishment through loneliness and idleness. It is so terrible an instrument, that it has brought convicts to suicide.”

Pessimist or optimist, there is no denying that his sentiment rings true to life. Not just how boredom is used as a tool of punishment, but in the outright comic juxtaposition of how we expend so much effort into living longer...yet as soon as we're bored, all we want to do is *kill time*.

I forcefully beseech you once again, dear reader, just as I did in “On Asceticism,” to please, please, please *stop killing time*.

Boredom as Poison

We see this same concept expressed two centuries earlier by Pascal, who believed that all of man's problems stem from his inability to sit in a quiet room alone: “Thus passes away all man's life. Men seek rest in a struggle against difficulties; and when they have conquered these, rest becomes insufferable. For we think either of the misfortunes we have or of those which threaten us. And even if we should see ourselves sufficiently sheltered on all sides, weariness of its own accord

would not fail to arise from the depths of the heart wherein it has its natural roots, and to fill the mind with its poison.”

It is sad how true this is, whether observing your own life or the lives of people you know who can never seem to find happiness.

The idle rich. The people who have everything yet are never satisfied. Back and forth they go between pain and boredom, pain and boredom, in their futile search for pleasure.

This pendulum is why Schopenhauer, similar to Epicurus, defines happiness as *negative only*: “Satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essentially always negative only, and never positive...when everything is finally overcome and attained, nothing can ever be gained but deliverance from some suffering or desire; consequently, we are only in the same position as we were before this suffering or desire appeared. What is immediately given to us is always only the want, i.e., the pain.”

That paragraph serves to take us full circle.

We started with Epicurus’ belief that *the greatest pleasure is not-pain*. Now, we see that happiness is “negative only,” with the removal of pain being the closest thing we can find to happiness.

Compare the pain of toothache to the pleasure of not-toothache, and you will recognize how it all comes together. Seneca and Epicurus came nearly two thousand years before Schopenhauer and Pascal, yet despite that, these brilliant thinkers all agree on the same principle:

The highest pleasure is the painless state.

All Pain, No Pleasure

Whether this realization is depressing or soothing depends on your relationship with the truth. Yes, the recognition that there is no lasting pleasure is depressing. At the same time, recognizing the true nature of this world means you'll now stop wasting time climbing a ladder that leads to nowhere.

What is the solution?

It is just as Seneca said: "Stop wanting things."

Based on everything we just read, I think a sound definition of happiness would be "the gap between what you want and what you have." Mathematically speaking:

Happiness = (What You Have) - (What You Want)

There are only two variables there that you can adjust.

You can increase *what you have*, but we have demonstrated here — and I'm sure your life experience confirms it, as mine does — that increasing *what you have* is only followed by a subsequent and correspondent increase in *what you want*.

The gap remains the same in size, and our happiness remains unchanged. This leaves only one other option:

Decrease "what you want."

That's it. That's the key to happiness, or at least it's the best humanity can come up with thus far.

Now you just have to do it.

Good luck, dear reader, and always remember what Plato once said: *the greatest wealth is to live content with little*.