The Acceptance of the Epicurean Thesis on Pleasure as the Absence of Pain

In this paper, I will argue that the Epicurean thesis on pleasure *(hēdonē)* as the absence of pain is a true claim and, moreover, is plausible. First, I will give justifications for the acceptance of pleasure as the absence of pain, as the Epicureans intended it to be understood. Then, I will offer further justification for the acceptance of a more extreme thesis on pleasure, specifically the Epicurean thesis which is interpreted to mean that the greatest pleasure occurs in the complete absence of pain. In order to do this, I present the following premises to support the irrefutability of the Epicurean thesis on pleasure. For the first premise, I present the Epicurean belief of the blessed life with respect to the pleasure-pain relationship. Forthe second premise, I discuss the extent to which Epicurean pleasure is hedonistic in nature. For the third premise, I show that, in the Epicurean philosophy, there is calculation of pleasure and pain, which is an important contributing factor to the plausibility of the thesis. Thus, the premises support the plausibility and, in fact, lead to the coherent acceptance of the Epicurean thesis on pleasure as the absence of pain and, more specifically, the greatest pleasure as the complete absence of pain.

I now discuss the importance of the Epicurean thesis on pleasure to their philosophy. According to Epicurus, pleasure is essentially related to the achievement of the blessed life. The blessed life, here, is defined as the health (*hugieia*) of the body (including the absence of bodily pain (*aponia))* and the soul’s freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*).Further, the Epicurean thesis on pleasure claims that the beginning and the end (*telos*) of the blessed life is pleasure. That is to say, because all of one’s choices and actions aim to achieve the end of the blessed life, it is each person’s aim to be healthy of body and free in soul. Thus, each person’s aim also is to avoid being in pain (*algedon*) and avoid living a life of fear, anxiety, and other non-pleasurable affections which are capable of causing disturbances of the soul. For the Epicureans, health of the body is parallel to being free from disturbance of the soul, such that said perceived dichotomy is, in fact, not separate but rather two aspects of one common goal. Therefore, by definition in terms of blessed life, pleasure is the absence of pain, both of the body and of the soul (chiefly, in terms of mental disturbance).

Having presented the context in which the Epicureans define pleasure as the absence of pain, I now show how the Epicurean thesis on pleasure as an affection, which is one-part of the criteria of truth, supports said belief in pleasure as the absence of pain. An affection (*pathe)* is commonly translated as a “feeling” or “passion” which is subjective, being unique to each individual. Additionally, affections are the sensational effects that each individual experiences passively. As such, for the Epicureans, both pleasure and pain are considered affections and are integrally related. As affections, pleasure and pain can only be brought about indirectly by the actions of any given individual for said individual. Additionally, each individual experiences pleasure and pain differently and at varying intensities. Thus, given the nature of affections, not all forms of pleasure and pain can be influenced or manipulated neither are all forms of pleasure and pain equal.

I now provide a thorough analogy, focusing on the aspect of affections, between pleasure and pain to hunger, thirst, and satiation to highlight the interconnected relation between pleasure and pain as the Epicurean philosophy details. When an individual experiences the affections of hunger and thirst, he or she is, according to the Epicureans, in bodily pain (often colloquially understood as discomfort). When said person eats or drinks, the food and drink result in feelings of “fullness” and satisfaction; that is, he or she experiences satiation. When said person experiences satiation, he or she experiences the absence of the bodily pain caused by hunger and thirst. Thus, by the Epicurean definition, satiation is one form of pleasure. As such, full satiation (or the complete absence of hunger and thirst) is the greatest pleasure that an individual can experience for said type of physical pain. As the analogy demonstrates, when one is in pain, he or she can only experience pleasure when that pain is absent; that is, one needs pleasure, or the absence of pain, in order to feel relief from said pain. When one is not in pain, being that there is an absence of pain, one experiences pleasure, by its definition.

Therefore, in a parallel manner, pleasure and pain can be applied to any type of presence-absence or wish-fulfillment relation of affections. Further, pleasure and pain are related in the same presence-absence relation: pleasure is the absence of pain while presence of pain precludes the experience of pleasure. By extension, in the same manner, the greatest pleasure occurs in the complete absence of pain.

That being said, I now show how Epicurean philosophy is a hedonistic system yet rejects brute hedonism. Epicureans maintain the definition of pleasure as the absence of pain, with the greatest pleasure as the complete absence of pain, claim that pleasure is the beginning and end to the blessed life, and encourage each individual to strive for the achievement of the blessed life. According to Epicurean philosophy, pleasure, being the absence of pain, is the primary good (*agathon*). By extension, the greatest pleasure is the highest good in the form of the complete absence of pain. For Epicureans, all choices and avoidances depend on avoiding and eliminating pain in order to have and maintain pleasure. This is an important aim because pleasure as an affection (*pathe*) is the criterion or “yardstick” for judging what is good.

Thus, Epicurean philosophy is one form of hedonism because it advocates the pursuit of the greatest pleasure (which is the complete absence of pain) as the Epicureans believe that pleasure is the highest good. It is because of the working definition of the highest good and the definition of the end of the blessed life that the Epicureans did not advocate for hedonism in its traditional sense. Rather, the Epicureans rejected brute hedonism, including self-gratification, sexual self-indulgence, heavy drinking, endless partying, feasting, etcetera. Instead, the Epicureans emphasized the importance of clear-headed reasoning in order to arrive at rational judgements for every choice and avoidance in order to reduce pain, thereby maximizing pleasure. Additionally, Epicureans felt that sober thinking allowed one to rid himself or herself of harmful opinions that could and did torment the soul.

Given the context of the Epicurean definition of pleasure, the Epicureans feel that living one’s life, in the aforementioned terms, though hedonistic as all choices and actions are aimed towards pleasure, defined as absence of pain, is beneficial because the result is the blessed life, specifically health of the body and freedom of disturbances of the soul. In short, living in the hedonistic terms set in the context of Epicurean philosophy, pleasure, as the absence of pain, is the end of the blessed life. Further, for the Epicureans, the greatest pleasure is the complete absence of pain and is the achievement of the end of the blessed life.

I now present an illustration of the relationship between pleasure and pain as intended by Epicurean philosophy. Because the Epicureans defined pleasure as the absence of pain, pleasure and pain are directly related. Where there is pain, there cannot be pleasure whereas, where there is pleasure, there cannot be pain. By extension, when one experiences the greatest pleasure, he or she experiences the complete absence of pain. If one were to consider the relationship between pleasure and pain in a mathematical sense, pleasure and pain would exists in a non-traditional hedonistic system where every pleasure is good (here, +) and every pain is bad (here, —). At this point, it would seem that every choice or action that results in pleasure, taken to be good (+), would be choice-worthy while every choice or action that results in pain, taken to be bad (—), would not be choice-worthy. However, despite this, Epicureans suggests that sometimes one chooses to avoid certain pleasures because said pleasures can produce more pain in the long-term. Similarly, sometimes one chooses to endure certain pains because said pains will produce more or longer-lasting pleasure in the long-term. Hence, in Epicurean philosophy, although every pleasure is good and every pain is bad, not every pleasure is choice-worthy and not every pain is to be avoided. The calculation of pleasure and pain shows the interrelated nature of pleasure and pain in the Epicurean tradition, which supports the plausibility of accepting the definition of pleasure as the absence of pain and, by extension, the greatest pleasure as the complete absence of pain.

Having detailed the context in which the Epicureans define pleasure, I now present two objections to the Epicurean thesis on pleasure, including the claim that the absence of one thing is the presence of another and the problem presented by pleasure-pain calculations that suggests a schism between good and choice-worthiness. The first objection is that the absence of something (particularly, pain) is not the presence of another thing (specifically, pleasure). An analogy for this objection is that of a wall that contains a broken area: the wall is present except in the broken area, which in the English language is usually termed a hole. Following the objection, the absence of the wall is not the presence of another thing (or hole), it is just the absence of the wall. In a similar way, the objection suggests that pleasure cannot be the absence of pain because the absence of pain is just an absence of pain. Another objection to the Epicurean thesis on pleasure is the dichotomy between being good (+) and not always being choice-worthy and the dichotomy between being bad (—) and not always being non-choice-worthy. This objection highlights the problem that arises when one differentiates between being good and being choice-worthy because doing so means that every choice and every avoidance must be judged through calculation of advantages and disadvantages. However, if said is to be the case, then there must be a divorce between the concept of good and the concept of choice-worthiness. The question becomes “why would one choose something, such as to act in a given way, if he or she did not deem said something, such as said action, as good (+)?” since individuals usually choose to act in ways that they believe, perceive, and feel are good (+), being that said choices and actions will result in pleasure.

I now demonstrate how pleasure as the absence of pain and the greatest pleasure as the complete absence of pain maintains plausibility in the context of Epicurean philosophy. For the first objection, I suggest that the objection misunderstands the Epicurean belief of the direct relationship between pleasure and pain. Further, I think that the first objection misses the key point that, for Epicureans, pleasure is defined as the absence of pain. For consistency, I show that for the aforementioned analogy, the objection also fails: a hole is the word that is given for (that is, defined as) the absence of a given material, such as in a wall as in the case that was previously presented. For the second objection, I again feel that the objection is based in a misunderstanding of the interrelated nature of pleasure and pain. I think that, as rational beings, human beings are able to consider the past and speculate regarding the future. Because of this unique ability, it seems that the schism between being good and being choice-worthy disappears as every choice and avoidance can be taken in the context of the overall calculations of pleasure and pain. The pleasure-pain calculations can be decided upon through sober reasoning so as to arrive at the most prudent decisions to yield the highest amount of pleasure. In such a way, the pleasure-pain calculations as presented assist one in arriving at the end blessed life and allow for one to aim to experience the greatest pleasure, or the complete absence of pain. Therefore, I feel that both of these objections fail to present problems for the Epicurean thesis on pleasure. Rather, I believe that these objections strengthen the arguments made by the Epicureans and highlight the plausibility of pleasure as the absence of pain, with the greatest pleasure being the complete absence of pain, in the context of Epicurean philosophy.

Thus, I feel that based on the context with Epicurean philosophy, the Epicurean thesis on pleasure *(hēdonē)* as the absence of pain is found to be valid and plausible. As the Epicurean belief of the blessed life suggests, pleasure as the absence of pain is the end of the blessed life, which is the health (*hugieia*) of the body (including the absence of bodily pain (*aponia))* and the soul’s freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*). Further in support of the plausibility of pleasure as the absence of pain and the greatest pleasure as the complete absence of pain is the form of hedonism that Epicurean philosophy urges: sober reasoning in order to arrive at rational choices and avoidances and to eliminate opinions so as to minimize and eliminate pain (thus, maximizing pleasure) and to free the soul from disturbances. Additionally, I have shown how pleasure-pain calculus is applied to the Epicurean thesis of pleasure as the absence of pain, which supports the plausibility of the theory that the greatest pleasure is the complete absence of pain. In conclusion, the Epicurean thesis on pleasure as the absence of pain and, further, the greatest pleasure as the complete absence of pain, is a valid and plausible claim supported by the premises presented.