

THE LIMIT OF PLEASURE

On Epicurus, and the Accounting Error at the Center of a Life

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Consider the first cold water of the morning, drunk standing at the sink before anything has been decided.

You have done this perhaps twelve thousand times. You have almost never noticed it. And yet if you were kept from water for two days, that glass would become the most extraordinary object in the world, and you would find, on drinking it, that it delivered a pleasure no purchase of your adult life has ever matched.

Nothing about the water changed. What changed was that you had been made capable of receiving it.

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There was a man in Athens who built an entire philosophy on that observation, and we have spent twenty-three centuries getting him exactly backward.

His name was Epicurus. He taught in a garden outside the city walls, and admitted to it women and slaves, which was not done. Seneca reports that a sign at the entrance told the stranger he would do well to stay, since here the highest good was pleasure.

From this we took the word *epicure*, and we hung it on the man who knows his wines. That is the inversion. The historical Epicurus lived on barley bread and water. He kept cheese in the house for holidays. In a surviving letter he asks a friend to send him a pot of cheese, so that he may, as he puts it, "fare sumptuously when I please."

That is a joke, and it is also the whole doctrine. The feast is a wedge of cheese. Not because he is denying himself, and not because austerity is noble — he had no patience for that, and thought the ascetics were as confused as the gluttons, merely in the other direction.

He ate bread and water because bread and water were *enough*, and he had noticed something about enough that almost nobody notices.

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Here is the observation, and it is the load-bearing beam under everything else.

Pleasure has a ceiling.

Not a slow diminishing return. A hard limit, reached early, past which no addition is possible. Epicurus put it plainly: the magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. Once you are not hungry, not thirsty, not cold, not afraid, not in pain, not anxious — you are at the top. There is nothing above that floor. Pleasure can then be *varied*, endlessly and pleasantly, but it cannot be *increased*.

Sit with the implication, because it is savage.

If the ceiling is reached by a man with bread, water, a roof, and a friend, then everything spent climbing above it purchases nothing. Not less than expected. Nothing. The whole vast enterprise — the better car, the larger house, the promotion, the recognition, the account balance that was going to make the difference — is a ladder erected above a ceiling, and the man climbing it is exerting himself in open air.

This is not a claim that comfort is bad or that ambition is foolish. It is an arithmetic claim about where the top is. And the reason it stings is that everyone has verified it privately, at least once, and then declined to act on it.

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He sorted our wants into three bins, and the sorting is the most practical thing in ancient philosophy.

Some desires are natural and necessary: food, water, shelter, safety, the company of people who know you. These are easily met and they have limits. Hunger stops. Thirst stops.

Some are natural but unnecessary: not food but delicacies, not shelter but a fine house. There is no harm in them and he did not forbid them. He only observed that they are optional, and that a life arranged so that it *requires* them has traded a small pleasure for a large exposure.

And some are neither natural nor necessary: fame, power, wealth beyond use, the regard of strangers. These he considered the dangerous ones, and the reason is structural rather than moral. **They have no limit built into them.** Hunger tells you when it is finished. Ambition never does. There is no quantity of money that is the correct quantity, no degree of recogni-

tion after which a man stops needing to be recognized. A desire with no natural stopping point cannot be satisfied — it can only be fed — and a life spent feeding it will end mid-meal.

The unlimited desires are the ones that promise the most and are constitutionally incapable of delivering. Not because the world withholds. Because there is no state of affairs that would count as arrival.

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What he thought was actually worth having, we tend to skip past, because it sounds like a greeting card until you notice what he ranked it against.

Of everything wisdom provides for a happy life, he said, by far the greatest is friendship.

Not one of the goods. The greatest — placed above security, above property, above the philosophy itself. And he built his school accordingly: not a lecture hall but a household, people living together, eating plainly, talking. The Garden was the argument. He was not describing the good life from a distance; he had assembled a small working model of it and lived inside it for thirty years.

There is a test in this for the rest of us. Take the last several years and ask how much was spent acquiring things that raise no ceiling, and how much was spent in the plain company of people who know you. Most of us will not like the ratio. I did not like mine.

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Then the fear underneath the whole apparatus, which he addressed with four words that have not been improved on.

Death is nothing to us.

His reasoning is characteristically flat. While you exist, death is absent. When death arrives, you do not. The two never occupy the same room, and so the thing being dreaded is a state that will never be experienced by anyone. There is no one there to whom it is happening.

You may find that consoling or you may not. But the practical part is not about death at all — it is about what the fear of it does to the hours in front of you. A man convinced he is running out will grab, hoard, and hurry, and will spend the afternoon he actually has securing an after-

noon he may not get. The fear does not extend the life. It ruins the part that was already in hand.

He earned the right to say it. Diogenes Laertius preserves a letter written on his last day, in what he calls the final and happiest day of his life, while he was in genuine agony from a blockage he could not survive. He writes that the joy of remembering his friend's conversations is set against all of it. That is either a man in denial or a man who had built something that held under load. Given thirty years of consistent practice, I incline to the second.

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Now the cost, because a philosophy presented without its bill is a brochure.

Epicurus advised his students to live unnoticed. Stay out of politics. Stay out of public life. The city is where the unlimited desires breed, and the ambitious man is never at rest, so withdraw to the garden and tend it.

I do not accept that, and I have argued the opposite at length elsewhere — that a society is stabilized by people who take ownership rather than retreat from it, and that the withdrawal of exactly the people best equipped to see clearly is how the field gets left to whoever wants it most. The Garden is a fine place to be happy. It is not a plan for a civilization, and Epicurus's Athens was destroyed by people who were not in gardens.

So take the inventory of desires and leave the counsel of retreat. That is not a contradiction; it is the discipline the man himself recommended, applied to him. He asked his students to examine every belief against experience. A tradition that exempts its founder from its own method has already stopped being a philosophy.

There is a second cost worth naming. This is a doctrine that can be worn as an excuse. *Pleasure has a ceiling* is true, and it is also the exact sentence a man reaches for when he has stopped trying and wants a classical justification. The difference between contentment and resignation is not visible from outside, and often not from inside either. The only honest test I know is whether the peace arrived *after* the effort or instead of it.

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None of this is a technique. It is a correction to an accounting error, and the error is that we have been valuing the wrong column.

The ordinary day is not the raw material from which a good life will later be manufactured. It is the finished product. It is the thing itself, already delivered, already in your hands — the water at the sink, the light coming across the floor at four in the afternoon, the particular sound of a door opening that tells you who came in without your having to look.

These are not consolations for a life that fell short of the plan. On the accounting Epicurus proposed, they are the whole of what was ever available, at any budget, to anyone.

The man had bread, water, cheese on the good days, a garden, and his friends. He reported that he was as happy as it is possible for a human being to be, and he did not appear to be lying, and he held to it while dying badly.

Everything after that is variation.

— *August Brooks*

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