

## FOOD AND PLEASURE IN NIGERIA: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO EPICURUS' PHILOSOPHY OF GOOD LIFE

**Olubanjo-Olufowobi, Olufunso**  
Department of Philosophy/Religion  
Mountain Top University  
Prayer-City Ogun State  
[oolufowobi@mtu.edu.ng](mailto:oolufowobi@mtu.edu.ng)  
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### **Abstract**

*Man is a pleasure seeking being, he innately seeks pleasure and avoids pain. His key sources of pleasure include: food, arts and beauty, music, wealth acquisition, monetary rewards, sex and other forms of social interaction, amongst other. However, the pleasure of food is superior to all other forms of pleasure, because it is related to needs that are more long-term and vital, embracing the entire life span, from feeding at the mother's breast to the final moment of existence. In Nigeria, pleasure has been greatly misconstrued especially in the expanse of food. It is taken to either mean consumption of tasty/sweet food (junks) or binging on food even to the detriment of the one's health. Although, Epicurus maintains that the beginning and root of every good life is pleasure especially of the stomach. Yet, the pleasure he canvasses for is not synonymous with gorge but rather simple satisfaction of desire that will keep the mind and body at peace. In other words, the pleasure man should crave for in any food should be the one that produces happiness to the entire being. This paper suggests pragmatic for through analytical exposition of Epicurus' philosophy of good life it offers practical paradigm to the major challenge of misconception of food pleasure in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Pleasure, Epicurus, Food, Pragmatic, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Man is a pleasure seeking being. His pleasure-seeking instinct is borne out of his desire to overcome the feeling of meaninglessness of life, to enjoy life and prominently to survive. Man's key sources of pleasure include sex, food, arts and beauty, music, material possession, monetary rewards, love and belongingness, amongst other. However, some pleasures are more significant than others in that they are crucial to his survival, since the foremost concern of every human being is survival. The superiority of food as a pleasurable need of man supersede all other forms of pleasure and can never be overemphasized. It is a basic and ineludible necessity of existence needed for daily functioning; providing nutrients for energy to enable growth, fuel physical activities and repair of body tissues; maintaining body temperature; enhancing good health and for sheer enjoyment. The choice of which have effects on our overall wellbeing and

existence. The right foods boost happiness, increase mental functioning, help maintain appropriate body weight and prevent specific illnesses. Essentially food has both the qualities of being nourishment to the body -nutritional function-, and also being pleasurable -hedonistic function. However, its quality of being pleasurable should not be separated from its quality of nourishment in fact it should dependent on it. For food poison is tantamount to cases where the pleasure-value of food exceed its nutritional-value. We thus conceive food pleasure to be the sensation of fulfillment one derives from satisfying the natural impulse of consuming any particular food. It is the sensual satisfaction derives from the consumption of any food.

In Nigeria, pleasure of food or pleasure derived from food has been greatly misconceived and blown out of proportion; causing food to be seen larger than life, taking on a glorified and revered position in human's life. This has resulted into eating disorder and unhealthy diet with a range of conditions that involve an obsession or over indulgence with food, taking solace in food for relief - especially alcoholic induced food - when sad, anxious, upset, lonely, stressed, excited, etc., using food as reward or threat, rather than as mainly nourishment that is pleasure oriented. The aftermath of which has been deteriorated health and untimely death. This paper attempts to reveal some misconception inherent in food pleasure in Nigeria and with the pragmatic approach of Epicurus philosophy, offers correction to the aberration.

### **The Philosophies of the Good Life**

Perhaps one of the oldest philosophical questions, which is also fundamental to every man that seeks to live well as rational being is: what is good life? This distinct question has generated various answers from philosophers of different epoch, school of thoughts as well as scholars from various pedigrees.

Many religions conceive good life in moral terms; as a life lived according to God's laws. A person, who lives this way, obeying the commandments and performing the proper rituals, is pious. And in most religions such piety will be rewarded. Obviously, many people do not receive their reward in this life. But devout believers are confident that their piety will not be in vain. Christian martyrs went singing to their deaths confident that they would soon be in heaven. Hindus expect that the law of karma will ensure that their good deeds and intentions will be rewarded, while evil actions and desires will be punished, either in this life or in future lives (Westacott, 2018).

Both Socrates and Plato also gave a moral conception of the good life in specified absolute priority to being a virtuous person over all other supposedly good things such as pleasure, wealth, or power. Socrates' definition of good life is depicted in his famous dictum: "the unexamined life is not worth living", this means good life is that life that questions and thinks about things; a life of contemplation, self - examination and open-minded wondering. He believes that in order to truly live a good life, a person needs to think about his existence and ask questions about the things around him. These suggest that the life of a person who merely wakes up in the morning, goes to work, does his job, comes home, watches television, goes to bed, and then repeats this process, day in and day out for his entire life, never really reflecting on what he ought to be doing or what he values and why, is not worth living. But for Socrates, participating in this type of rational reflection about what you value and why, that is, doing philosophy, is not enough by itself in order to live a good life. What is also needed is that an individual becomes a master of himself, using his reason to rein in his passions, as well as doing what he can to help promote the stability of his community.

While most people believe that the highest good is the acquisition of material wealth, pursuit of honor, or satisfaction of bodily pleasure, Aristotle argues that all of these goods are deficient as the highest good in some way. Material wealth is always acquired for the purpose of attaining something else. Pursuing honor is not connected to any characteristic of the person himself but how others perceive him. And satisfying bodily pleasures is not a good peculiar to human beings. What separates human beings from non-human animals is our capacity for reason and a life that aims only at satisfying bodily pleasures is one Aristotle claims is not fit for human beings but for cattle. The highest good according to Aristotle must be something that is consistent with the maximization of our faculties as human beings (Surprenant, 2015).

And so, he argues that a good life for a human being would focus to a significant extent on contemplation and learning or acquiring the intellectual virtues. But spending your life in contemplation alone is not enough. Aristotle claims the person who lives a good life also acts rightly and develops the appropriate state of character from which to perform those right actions. While the intellectual virtues are acquired as a result of learning, these character virtues, such as courage, temperance, and generosity, are acquired as the result of habituation and life experience. Acquisition of both the intellectual virtues and these virtues of character make up Aristotle's highest good, which he identifies with the Greek

word Eudaimonia, which in translations of Aristotle often is translated as the word happiness (Surprenant, 2015).

Aristippus, the founder of the Cyrenaica school believes that the good life rests upon the belief that among human values pleasure is the highest and pain the lowest - and one that should be avoided. Actions that produce or lead to pleasure are good, while actions that produce or lead to pain are bad. Hence, he made pleasure the standard of morality, the criterion for distinguishing right from wrong actions. For him, the most intense pleasures are bodily pleasures i.e. food, wine and sexual gratification and the good life is to maximize the bodily pleasure to greatest degree possible. Following in this line of thought, was Epicurus who believed that pleasure is the criterion for deciding what ought to be done and what ought to be avoided, what is good and what is bad. Thus, he asserts that:

We affirm that pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily; for we have recognized this as the first good being connate with us; and it is with reference to it that we begin every choice and avoidance (Rand, 2004) .

The view that behavior in pursuit of pleasure assured an upright life has been subscribed to widely even by non-philosophers. This perhaps could be true because man's natural inclination to pleasure is strong. Jeremy Bentham also lent his voice on this view when he asserts that; "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters: pain and pleasure. They govern us in all we do, in all say, in all we think." Man therefore ought to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Thus, Richard Taylor (2000) asserts that:

Often all the things that have ever been proposed as the unique and greatest good, perhaps none has won adherence than pleasure. Feelings of pleasure, it would seem, are always good and their opposite, feeling of pain are always are bad. One need be not a philosopher to arrive at this opinion and it is perhaps for this reason that the everyday philosophy of vast numbers of people is the philosophy of hedonism

### **The Good Life in Contemporary Nigerian Context: A Contrast to Epicurus Philosophy of Good Life**

In Nigeria context, if we say someone is "living the good life," we probably mean that they enjoy lots of recreational pleasures: good food, good wine, lounging by the pool in the sun with a cocktail and a beautiful partner. Consequently, good life in Nigeria parlance is synonymous to pleasurable life. An average Nigerian

conceives good life in hedonistic terms - the view that pleasure is the good, or what makes life worth living. This hedonistic conception of the good life makes an average Nigerian Epicurean; a lover of sensual pleasures especially of good food and drink.

However, good food to an average Nigerian includes; fried food, sugary cereals, cakes, rolls, candies, pizza, burgers, pies, ice-cream, cookies etc. Even by good wine he implies carbonated/sweetened beverage, 100% canned/bottle fruit juice or drink/beverage containing alcohol; a depressant which in low doses causes euphoria, reduced anxiety, and sociability and in higher doses causes intoxication, stupor and unconsciousness. All these “good food” are processed foods which are deficient in nutrient; their natural properties have been lost and substituted with colouring, chemical preservatives and carbonated sweeteners. Not only are these junks taken as pleasurable food, they are also taken in excess to the detriment of healthy living. Food pleasure is thus defined in term of sweetness and given precedence over food nutritional value, causing a widespread of low consumption of proteins, fruits and vegetables. As such the nutritional intake of individual appears to be undergoing a transition from high-fiber, calorie-sparse, low-protein diets to low-fiber, calorie-dense, and high-protein, diets. This unhealthy dietary lifestyle is heightened with the rise in the number of fast food restaurants serving meals with high salt and sugar content as well as preservatives, often containing saturated fat, while excessive intake of salt is also promoted by food additives such as monosodium glutamate common in delicacies such as *suya*, *kilisi*, *isi-ewu*, *ngwo-ngwo*, among others (Adewole, 2016), complemented by carbonated drinks, canned fruit juices, wine or alcoholic drink. This unhealthy dietary extends also to home-made cuisines. In our modern day home - made dishes hardly is anything cooked without additive especially artificial spicy. Artificial spices are preferred to natural spices which to an average Nigerian make food sweeter. Thus, an average Nigerian sees food pleasure to be synonymous with consumption of sweet food.

However, Basil Okeahialam (2017), a cardiologist at the University of Jos, gave a warning that artificial or factory-made seasonings, which have high amounts of salt or salt-related chemicals, are not as healthy as traditional condiments in preparing foods. According to him, an African has the natural tendency to retain salt in his or her body, hence the need to reduce salt in-take and consumption of foods high in salt and related chemicals. Buttressing this view, Peace .N. Ugbajah, a nutritionist with of Health and Healthy living, advises against excessive use of seasonings, as they often contain some questionable ingredients

that can be harmful to the human health, when used over time. Also, they don't have added nutritional value to foods. These enhancers have taken the place of many of the traditional and naturally produced seasonings, such as, Ogiri (sesame seeds) and Iru (African locust bean), among others, which are said to contain protein, minerals and vitamins, which are healthy. They also add spice, flavour and nutritional value to foods.

Circumstances, when good foods are actually healthy food they are binged on; an average Nigerian eats more than the body requires. Thus, taking pleasure in heavy meals, especially meals heavy in carbohydrates and proteins - a diet heavy in meat and mountain of rice or heavy mound of fufu, eba etc. - with little or no vitamin. Another misconception of food pleasure is the deliberating skipping of meal in order to experience gnawing of hunger with the view that the more the hunger the more the sate derived. In other words, they believed that to enjoy a good meal requires that one suffer the discomfort of the prior gnawing of hunger. In their view, pleasure increases as the famishing body is nourished; pleasure is the restoration of a bodily organ to its satisfied state. But it is not the depleted part that is enjoying being replenished; that part is in at least partial pain.

These unguided pleasures tend to cause enormous health problems. In fact, Nigerians are becoming sicker than ever before with more and more life threatening diseases being discovered everyday as a result of junk food. Heart diseases, brain damage, obesity and diabetes, coronary thrombosis, digestive problems, renal disease and cancer, chronic fatigue and tiredness and their aftermaths were all aliens to Nigerians some centuries ago but with the widespread misconception of pleasure such diseases are prevalence in the society.

Truism hedonism suggests devotion to what some have called the "lower" pleasures such as sex, food, drink, and sensual indulgence in general. Epicureanism is popularly understood to mean exactly the same as hedonism since Epicurus was thought by some of his contemporaries to advocate for pleasure as the goal of human actions and the standard of morality. Even today an "epicure" is someone who is especially appreciative of food and drink. Indeed, Epicurus certainly praised all kinds of pleasures but he didn't advocate that we lose ourselves in sensual debauchery which he reasoned are for only short duration, ending as soon as they begun. But more and importantly, they are often followed by intense pains. For instance, the pleasure of being

drunk maybe great in a moment, but the pain of longer duration follows. Hence, in order to live a pleasurable life, Epicurus believes that there must be avoidance of pain which is essential not the indulgence in pleasure. And to avoid pain, one must cultivate discipline and often decline opportunities to engage in bodily/sensual pleasure. Paradoxically, Epicurus thought the most pleasurable life is the life in which we avoid chasing after pleasure when he wrote:

When therefore we say that pleasure is a chief good, we are not speaking of the pleasure of the debauched man or those which lie in sensual enjoyment as some think who are ignorant, and do not entertain our opinions or else interpret them perversely; but we mean the freedom of the soul from confusion. For it is not continued drinking and revels..... that makes life pleasant, but sober contemplations which examine into the reasons for all choice and avoidance, which put to flight the vain opinion from which the greater part of the confusion arises which troubles the soul ..... No pleasure is intrinsically bad; but the efficient causes of some pleasures bring with them a great many perturbations of pleasure (Copleston, 2003, p. 407).

Since Epicurus is not talking of immediate and momentary pleasure, but rather long term pleasure, any immediate pleasure that will be followed by pain is therefore to be rejected, and any pain that will be followed by long-term pleasure should be endured. It is therefore not every pleasure that should be pursued nor should every pain be avoided. Every pleasure is therefore a good, on account of its own nature, but it does not follow that every pleasure is worthy of being chosen; just as every pain must not be avoided. We should therefore always look to the future to see whether any particular pleasurable action will not in the long run lead to a greater pain, or whether any particular painful action will in the long run lead to long-term pleasure. So for Epicurus, pleasure derives from food should not just be a sensual one but that that will keep one alive; living and functioning in a healthy way free from pain. This is what good life entails to him.

### **The Pragmatic Approach to Pleasure in Nigeria**

A pragmatist, Epicurus was aloof with learning that seemed irrelevant to the main purpose of gaining well-being, or peaceful living (*Ataraxia*). The thrust of his philosophy is pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. By pleasure he means freedom from pain. This according to him is achievable by taming our desire; being contented with what satisfy our fundamental need and

renouncing what is superfluous. Practicing what he moralized, Epicurus lived on nutritious but inexpensive food; water, a weak wine, bread, olive, vegetable and cheese. Thus, Epicurus is not a foodie, a wine buff or a gourmet as he is erroneously conceived to be.

The implication of this is that Epicurus' philosophy teaches us to be contented with what satisfy our fundamental needs and renounce what is superfluous. Translating his philosophy into our contemporary conception of pleasure, we are compel to take pleasure simple; enjoying good food especially good produce and good wine, enjoying them deeply without allowing gastronomy obsession. In other words, pleasure seeks in food should be the one that is devoid of pain to the body and trouble to the soul.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Man is innately pleasure-seeker. Yet the pleasure of food supersedes other pleasures. The indispensability of food in human life is palpable; be it as pleasurable thing or survival force; regular supply of nutrients for daily functioning to the body. Pleasure is an actual *requirement* in the nutritive process. Howbeit, this function is dependent on its nourishment value. The pleasure we crave in any food should be nutrition - oriented; that will provide necessary health, growth and wellbeing; playing significant role in the quality of life and longevity. Our existence depend on food and it is something that if not chosen carefully can significantly impinge our health. Indisputably the survival of man is not dependent on all food except on healthy food in an appropriate measured proportion. Hence, Epicurus advices that pleasure sought in food should be the one that produces happiness to the entire being. As such this paper recommends the follow:

- Pleasure should be taken in moderation with care and forethought
- Food pleasure need not take the form of debauchery, binging or gorge. Much pleasure is derived from food when we savor and relish food using all our senses and attention, actively anticipate them and reflect on them in an immense way. Research has reveal that the act of savoring food (particularly healthy food) intensifies the pleasure we extract from simple things and delivers greater satisfaction from them.
- Finally, Nigerian should return to traditional cuisine, served with fruits.

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