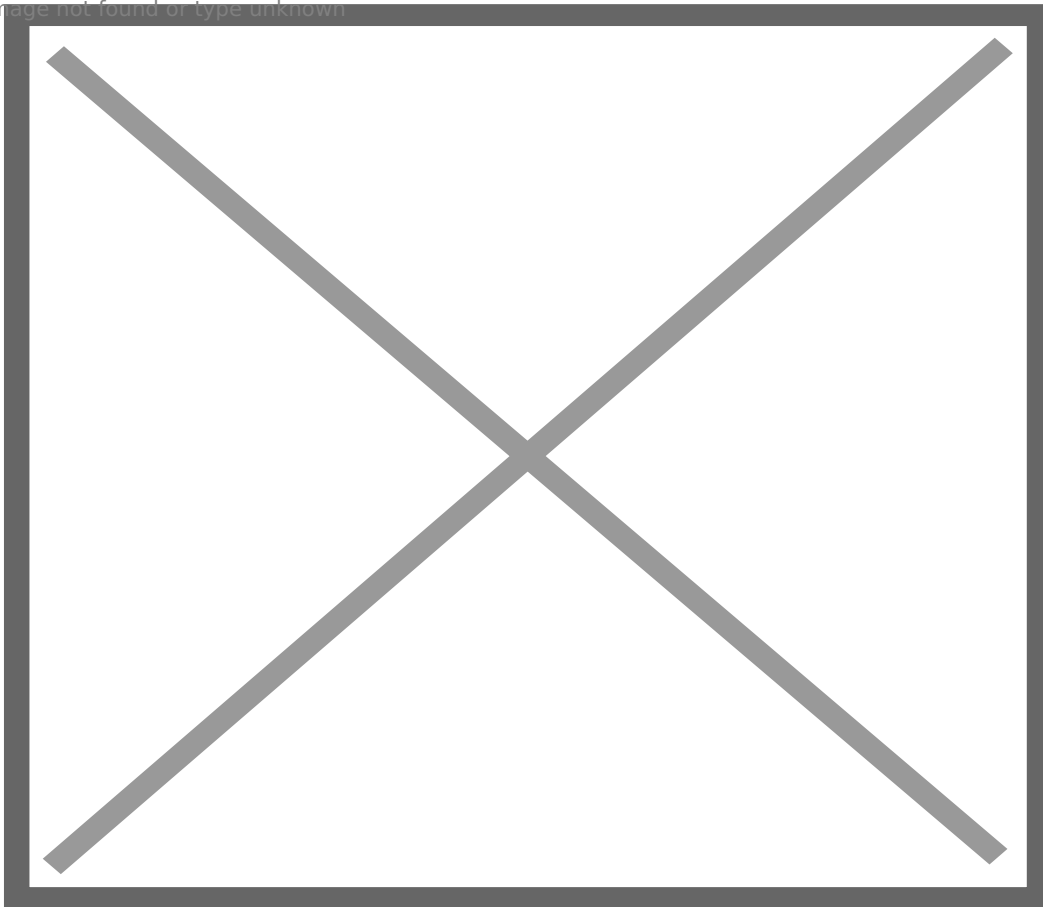


# Sunday November 9, 2025 - Zoom Discussion 12:30 PM EST - Epicurus on Good And Evil

Post by "Cassius" of November 8, 2025 at 3:06 PM

Here are additional citations on Epicurus as to the nature of good and evil that we can discuss tomorrow. it's hard to think of a topic that has more far-reaching implications. If anyone has suggestions for citations to add, please post in this thread. I'm also setting this up as a FAQ answer here:

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[What Did Epicurus Say About the Relationship Between Good and Evil? - Epicureanfriends.com](http://www.epicureanfriends.com)  
[www.epicureanfriends.com](http://www.epicureanfriends.com)

## What Was Epicurus' View Of The Nature of Good And Evil?

**In the Epicurean system there is no such thing as a separate force or absolute nature of good and evil. Good exists only through the feeling of pleasure and evil only through the feeling of pain. Citations:**

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4795-sunday-november-9-2025-zoom-discussion-12-30-pm-est-epicurus-on-good-and-evil/?postID=37716#post37716>

## 1. Letter to Menoeceus [124]

1. *Bailey*: "Become accustomed to the belief that [death is nothing to us](#). **For all good and evil consists in sensation**, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality."
2. As Epicurus stated in his letter to Menoeceus:
  1. [129] And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good. And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. [130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.
3. U423 Plutarch, That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible, 7, p. 1091A:
  1. Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their "thing delighted" – their good – is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: "That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good."
4. Yonge Translation of Principal Doctrine 6:
  1. For the sake of feeling confidence and security with regard to men, and not with reference to the nature of government and kingly power being a good, some men have wished to be eminent and powerful, in order that others might attain this feeling by their means; thinking that so they would secure safety as far as men are concerned. So that, if the life of such men is safe, they have attained to the nature of good; but if it is not safe, then they have failed in obtaining that for the sake of which they originally desired power according to the order of nature.
5. As Torquatus states in On Ends Book 1:
  1. [[29] ... "Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations. [30] Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after

pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion. These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey sweet, no one of which facts are we bound to support by elaborate arguments; it is enough merely to draw attention to the fact; and there is a difference between proof and formal argument on the one hand and a slight hint and direction of the attention on the other; the one process reveals to us mysteries and things under a veil, so to speak; the other enables us to pronounce upon patent and evident facts. Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?

6. Torquatus in On Ends Book I Section XII.

1. The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

7. **Arrian, Diatribes of Epictetus, I.20.19:**

1. Why, Epicurus, do you even light a lamp and labor for our sake, and write so many books? **Ibid, II.20.9:** Dear fellow, why do you bother yourself about us? Why do you keep up a vigil on our account, for which you light a lamp? Why do you get up? Why do you write so many big books? Is it to keep one or another of us from being tricked into believing that the gods care for men, or is it to keep one or another of us from supposing that the nature of good is other than pleasure? If this is indeed so, then back to your bed and go to sleep!

8. Cicero On Ends ( *De Finibus* , Book II, 6.18)

1. "He says that virtue cannot exist without pleasure, nor pleasure without virtue; but how inconsistent and contradictory are such assertions! For if it is pleasure that constitutes the supreme good, what place is left for virtue?"

9. Cicero On Ends Book II Section X

1. Now not to see that the greatest proof we have with regard to that form of pleasure apart from which he declares himself wholly unable to understand the nature of

good (he pursues this pleasure into detail thus, that which we enjoy through the palate, and through the ears; then he adds the rest, things not to be named without an apologetic preface) —very well, this stern and serious philosopher does not see that the only good within his knowledge is a thing not even to be desired, because, on the authority of the same thinker, when- ever we are without pain we do not crave that form of pleasure. How irreconcilable these statements are!

#### 10. Interpretation of Vatican Saying 42 by DeWitt

1. The specific teaching that life itself is the greatest good is to be drawn from Vatican Saying 42: "The same span of time includes both beginning and termination of the greatest good." If this seems to be a dark saying, the obscurity is dispelled by viewing it as merely a denial of belief in either pre-existence or the afterlife. As Horace wrote, concluding Epistle i.16 with stinging abruptness, "Death is the tape-line that ends the race of life." Editors, however, misled by the summum bonum fallacy, equate "the greatest good" with pleasure and so are forced to emend. The change of a single letter does the trick but fundamental teaching is obliterated. While this quoted statement is first-hand evidence of the Epicurean attitude, the syllogistic approach is also known from an extant text, of which the significance has been overlooked. The major premise is the assumption that the greatest good must be associated with the most powerful emotions, that is, the worst of all fears and the greatest of all joys. Now the worst of all fears is that of a violent death and the greatest of all joys is escape from the same. The supporting text runs as follows: "That which occasions unsurpassable joy is the bare escape from some dreadful calamity; and this is the nature of 'good,' if one apprehend it rightly and then stand by his finding, and not go on walking round and round and harping uselessly on the meaning of 'good'." This passage marks the summary cutting of a Gordian knot, the meaning of "good," upon which Plato had harped so tediously. Epicurus finds a quick solution by appealing to the Feelings, that is to Nature, as the criterion; it is their verdict that the supreme good is life itself, because the strongest emotions are occasioned by the threat of losing it or the prospect of saving it.

#### 11. Interpretation of Frances Wright in Chapter 3 of A Few Days In Athens

1. "Yes, in a great measure, yet not all together: we are all the wooers of virtue, but we are wooers of a different character." "And may she not then favor one more than another?" "That is a question," replied the Gargettian, playfully, " that each will answer in his own favor. If you ask me, he continued, - with one of his sweetest tones and smiles, "I shall say, that I feel myself virtuous, because my soul is at rest." "If this be your criterion, you should with the stoics deny that pain is an evil." "By no means: so much the contrary, I hold it the greatest of all evils, and the whole aim of my life, and of my philosophy, is to escape from it. To deny that pain is an evil is such another quibble as the Elean's denial of motion: that must exist to man which exists to his senses; and as to existence or non existence abstracted from them, though it may afford an idle argument for an idle hour, it can never enter as a truth, from which to draw conclusions, in the practical lessons of a master. To deny that pain is an evil seems more absurd than to deny its existence,

which has also been done, for its existence is only apparent from its effect upon our senses; how then shall we admit the existence, and deny the effect, which alone forces that admittance? But we will leave these matters to the dialecticians of the Portico. I feel myself virtuous because my soul is at rest. With evil passions I should be disturbed and uneasy; with uncontrolled appetites I should be disordered in body as well as mind — for this reason, and for this reason only, I avoid both.” “Only!” “Only: virtue is pleasure; were it not so, I should not follow it.”

12. Interpretation of Frances Wright in Chapter 16 of A Few Days In Athens

1. Let Epicurus be your guide. The source of every enjoyment is within yourselves. Good and evil lie before you. The good is — all which can yield you pleasure: the evil — what must bring you pain. Here is no paradox, no dark saying, no moral hid in tables.”

13. Compare Epicurus' view to What Cicero Says Against Epicurus in On Ends Book Two

1. “For the origin of the Chief Good he goes back, I understand, to the birth of living things. As soon as an animal is born, it delights in pleasure and seeks it as a good, but shuns pain as an evil. Creatures as yet uncorrupted are according to him the best judges of Good and Evil. That is the position both as you expounded it and as it is expressed in the phraseology of your school. What a mass of fallacies! Which kind of pleasure will it be that guides a mewling infant to distinguish between the Chief Good and Evil, ‘static’ pleasure or ‘kinetic’? — since we learn our language, heaven help us! from Epicurus. If the ‘static’ kind, the natural instinct is clearly towards self-preservation, as we agree; but if the ‘kinetic,’ and this is after all what you maintain, then no pleasure will be too base to be accepted; and also our new-born animal in this case does not find its earliest motive in the highest form of pleasure, since this on your showing consists in absence of pain. For proof of this, however, Epicurus cannot have gone to children nor yet to animals, which according to him hold a mirror up to nature; he could hardly say that natural instinct guides the young to desire the pleasure of freedom from pain. This cannot excite appetite; the ‘static’ condition of feeling no pain exerts no driving-power, supplies no impulse to the will (so that Hieronymus also is wrong here); it is the positive sensation of pleasure and delight that furnishes a motive. Accordingly Epicurus’s standing argument to prove that pleasure is naturally desired is that infants and animals are attracted by the ‘kinetic’ sort of pleasure, not the ‘static’ kind which consists merely in freedom from pain. Surely then it is inconsistent to say that natural instinct starts from one sort of pleasure, but that the Chief Good is found in another. “As for the lower animals, I set no value on their verdict. Their instincts may be wrong, although we cannot say they are perverted. One stick has been bent and twisted on purpose, another has grown crooked; similarly the nature of wild animals, though not indeed corrupted by bad education, is corrupt of its own nature. Again in the infant the natural instinct is not to seek pleasure; its instinct is merely towards self-regard, self-preservation and protection from injury. Every living creature, from the moment of birth, loves itself and all its members; primarily this self-regard embraces the two main divisions of mind and body, and

subsequently the parts of each of these. Both mind and body have certain excellences; of these the young animal grows vaguely conscious, and later begins to discriminate, and to seek for the primary endowments of Nature and shun their opposites. Whether the list of these primary natural objects of desire includes pleasure or not is a much debated question; but to hold that it includes nothing else but pleasure, neither the limbs, nor the senses, nor mental activity, nor bodily integrity nor health, seems to me to be the height of stupidity. And this is the fountain-head from which one's whole theory of Goods and Evils must necessarily flow. Polemo, and also before him Aristotle, held that the primary objects were the ones I have just mentioned. Thus arose the doctrine of the Old Academy and of the Peripatetics, maintaining that the End of Goods is to live in accordance with Nature, that is, to enjoy the primary gifts of Nature's bestowal with the accompaniment of virtue. Callipho coupled with virtue pleasure alone; Diodorus freedom from pain. . . . In the case of all the philosophers mentioned, their End of Goods logically follows: with Aristippus it is pleasure pure and simple; with the Stoics, harmony with Nature, which they interpret as meaning virtuous or morally good life, and further explain this as meaning to live with an understanding of the natural course of events, selecting things that are in accordance with Nature and rejecting the opposite. Thus there are three Ends that do not include moral worth, one that of Aristippus or Epicurus, the second that of Hieronymus, and the third that of Carneades; three that comprise moral goodness together with some additional element, those of Polemo, Callipho and Diodorus; and one theory that is simple, of which Zeno was the author, and which is based entirely on propriety, that is, on moral worth. (As for Pyrrho, Aristo and Erillus, they have long ago been exploded.) All of these but Epicurus were consistent, and made their final ends agree with their first principles, — Aristippus holding the End to be Pleasure, Hieronymus freedom from pain, Carneades the enjoyment of the primary natural objects. What Epicurus, if in saying that pleasure was the primary object of attraction, he meant pleasure in the sense of Aristippus, ought to have maintained the same ultimate Good as Aristippus; or if he made pleasure in the sense of Hieronymus his Chief Good, should he at the same time have allowed himself to make the former kind of pleasure, that of Aristippus, the primary attraction? "The fact is that when he says that the verdict of the senses themselves decides pleasure to be good and pain evil, he assigns more authority to the senses than the law allows to us when we sit as judges in private suits. We cannot decide any issue not within our jurisdiction; and there is not really any point in the proviso which judges are fond of adding to their verdicts: 'if it be a matter within my jurisdiction,' for if it was not within their jurisdiction, the verdict is equally invalid with the proviso omitted. What does come under the verdict of the senses? Sweetness, sourness, smoothness, roughness, proximity, distance; whether an object is stationary or moving, square or round. A just decision can therefore only be delivered by Reason, with the aid in the first place of that knowledge of things human and divine, which may rightly claim the title of Wisdom; and secondly with the assistance of the Virtues, which Reason would have to be the

mistresses of all things, but you considered as the handmaids and subordinates of the pleasures. After calling all of these into council, she will pronounce first as to Pleasure, that she has no claim, not merely to be enthroned alone in the seat of our ideal Chief Good, but even to be admitted as the associate of Moral Worth. As regards freedom from pain her decision will be the same. For Carneades will be put out of court, and no theory of the Chief Good will be approved that either includes pleasure or absence of pain, or does not include moral worth. Two views will thus be left. After prolonged consideration of these, either her final verdict will be that there is no Good but moral worth and no Evil but moral baseness, all other things being either entirely unimportant or of so little importance that they are not desirable or to be avoided, but only to be selected or rejected; or else she will prefer the theory which she will recognize as including the full beauty of moral worth, enriched by the addition of the primary natural objects and of a life completed to its perfect span. And her judgment will be all the clearer, if she can first of all settle whether the dispute between these rival theories is one of fact, or turns on verbal differences only.