

Illustrations and Analogies For Explaining the "Two And Only Two Feelings" Argument

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My attention today got diverted over to the "Absence of Pain" Substack article, but when I started the day my focus was elsewhere. Initially, I was trying to come up with better and clearer ways to describe the principle that when you have a universe of two options, the absence of one is the presence of the other. That is something that needs to "click" in peoples' minds before they truly begin to understand how the terms "pleasure" and "absence of pain" can be interchangeable.

I have a draft of an article oriented toward that topic prepared, but I am not nearly 100% satisfied with it. This is one that would definitely improve with some feedback that would help reorder, add, or subtract from the illustrations that are in the list already. I've started with illustrations that can be found directly in the ancient texts, and added a few modern illustrations, but I feel sure there are others that have not yet been included, potentially even some better than any that are included here.

Before I consider publishing a version of this on Substack or even as a blog article here, I'd appreciate feedback on these illustrations / analogies from anyone so inclined. Does each one work fairly well? Others you can think of as better? Comment on which among each section are the most impactful.

As always, thanks very much.

Two and Only Two: Illustrations of the Epicurean Binary of Pleasure and Pain

Epicurus makes a claim that is both simple and radical: there are exactly two feelings, pleasure and pain, and nothing else. Every sentient experience falls into one category or the other. There is no neutral third state that is neither pleasant nor painful, no middle ground where sensation has somehow opted out of the binary.

This claim carries an immediate consequence that critics of Epicurus have resisted for two thousand years: **the absence of pain is not a neutral condition — it is pleasure.** Not a pale or diminished pleasure, not a placeholder waiting for "real" pleasure to arrive, but pleasure fully and actually present. When pain is gone, what remains is not a void. What remains is the

other of the only two things there are.

The argument is logical, but logic alone rarely produces conviction. What makes an argument land — what makes it felt rather than merely followed — is an image that shows the same truth in a form the eye and the body can recognize immediately. Epicurus and Lucretius knew this. They built their philosophy on illustrations, not just propositions.

What follows is a collection of those illustrations, beginning with the ones the Epicureans themselves used and moving to examples from the modern world. But first, the underlying principle deserves to be stated clearly on its own, because it is a principle that runs through the whole of Epicurean thought — not just its ethics.

The Principle: When Two Covers Everything

The logical structure at work here has a precise form. Two categories are **jointly exhaustive** when together they cover every possible case — when nothing falls outside them. They are **mutually exclusive** when nothing can belong to both at once. When a pair of categories is both jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive, a single consequence follows that cannot be argued around: **the absence of one is, by definition, the presence of the other**. Not probably. Not in most cases. Necessarily, always, without exception.

Pleasure and pain, as Epicurus defines them, form exactly such a pair. They cover every possible state of sentient experience — nothing falls outside them — and no experience can be both pleasant and painful in the same respect at the same time. This means that the moment pain is absent, pleasure is not merely likely or approaching or about to arrive. It IS present. The two conditions share a single boundary, and crossing that boundary in either direction is instantaneous and total.

This is not an empirical observation that could in principle have turned out otherwise. Epicurus is not reporting that he surveyed human feelings and found them to sort neatly into two groups. He is establishing a definition: these two categories, so defined, leave no remainder. The neutral middle ground that critics of Epicurus want to insert between pleasure and pain is not a discovery — it is a refusal to accept the definition. The person who insists on a neutral third feeling is in the same position as someone who insists there must be a third verdict besides guilty and not guilty, or a third position for a light switch besides on and off. The vocabulary for such a verdict exists; the reality it would name does not.

This same logical structure — two categories, jointly exhaustive, mutually exclusive, leaving no third option — is the foundation of Epicurean physics as well as Epicurean ethics. Everything in the universe is either body (that which can touch and be touched, that which impacts and receives impact) or void (intangible space, offering no resistance). Epicurus makes the identical move in both domains. He is not borrowing a physics analogy to illuminate ethics. He is

applying one method consistently across everything. When you understand how the binary works in physics, you understand how it works in ethics — because it is the same logical instrument.

The illustrations below make this visible rather than just arguable. Each one shows, in a domain where the principle is already obvious to everyone, the same structure that Epicurus claims for feeling: two conditions, one boundary, no middle ground, the absence of one being the immediate and total presence of the other.

Part One: Illustrations from the Epicurean Texts

Bodies and Space — The Foundational Binary

The single most powerful illustration available is not borrowed from another domain. It is the foundation of Epicurean physics itself.

In the *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus begins his account of the universe with a stark declaration: everything that exists is either body or void. Not atoms, specifically — body. That which is. And the defining characteristic of body is precisely its capacity to act on other things and to be acted upon: to push and be pushed, to touch and be touched, to impact and receive impact. Void — which Epicurus calls *ἀναφής φύσις*, “intangible nature” — is defined as its perfect opposite: that which offers no resistance, which cannot touch or be touched, through which everything passes without contact.

Lucretius develops this into a closed logical argument in *De Rerum Natura* Book I. Suppose someone proposes a third kind of existence alongside bodies and space. Lucretius’s answer is immediate: ask one question about this proposed third thing. Can it touch or be touched? Can it impact or receive impact? If yes — it is body. If no — it is void. There is no further category in which a third answer could be housed. The two definitions are jointly exhaustive. Any proposed third existence collapses back into one of the two the moment you press it.

This is the identical logical structure Epicurus applies to feelings. Propose a neutral state between pleasure and pain. Ask one question: is it painful? If yes — it is pain. If no — it is pleasure. Not the approach toward pleasure, not a neutral non-pain state waiting for something further to arrive, but pleasure present and actual. There is no room left for a third answer. Epicurus is not borrowing a convenient analogy from his physics. He is applying the same method, making the same move, closing the same logical door.

Before laying out the physics of bodies and space, Epicurus opens the *Letter to Herodotus* with a methodological instruction that applies with equal force to his account of feeling. We must, he says, “seize firmly the things that underlie our words” — the primary concept that each term points to must be clearly fixed — “else we shall leave everything undetermined as we dispute

to infinity, or else we shall be using empty words.” This is not merely a logical caution. It is a precise diagnosis of what goes wrong in every dispute about pleasure that has run for two thousand years without resolution. The person who has never fixed a clear first concept of what pleasure IS cannot recognize it when it is present, cannot identify its arrival, cannot distinguish having it from lacking it. They will dispute to infinity about whether the Epicurean state of pain-freedom counts as pleasure — because “pleasure” remains an empty word for them, pointing at nothing definite. The binary is Epicurus’s instrument for ending that dispute by supplying the fixed reference point: pleasure is what is present when pain is absent. Once that concept is clear, the word points to something that can actually be recognized — and will be recognized, as a matter of course, by anyone who has stopped disputing long enough to look.

The direction of the question matters. Pain is the more immediately recognizable of the two states — when acute pain is present, no one fails to notice it. Pleasure, as Epicurus defines it, is broader and in many of its forms quieter: the pleasures of memory, of friendship, of philosophical conversation, of a body simply functioning without disturbance. These are real and fully present, but they are easy to overlook because they are not dramatic.

The therapeutic point of the binary is therefore corrective in a specific way. It is not an argument for complacency or low expectations — Epicurus himself maintained an extensive circle of friends, wrote and taught without ceasing, took active pleasure in food and conversation and philosophy, and encouraged everyone around him to do the same. The correction is not “stop seeking.” It is “seek from the right foundation, and recognize what you already have so that you can build on it intelligently.” The person who cannot recognize pleasure when pain is absent keeps seeking desperately and anxiously, driven by the false conviction that they have not yet arrived — and so misses both what is already present and the direction in which genuine additional pleasure lies. The person who correctly reads the binary can pursue friendship, philosophy, and the fuller pleasures of an engaged life from a position of clarity rather than chronic restlessness. Epicurus’s argument runs in the corrective direction: begin from what everyone recognizes (pain), establish that its absence is not a neutral waiting-room for something further, and from that correct foundation pursue pleasure actively and without confusion about what it is.

The image this produces is elemental: a particle of matter against empty space. Something, and the absence of something. Two conditions, one universe.

The Relay Torch — Fire or Cold Ash

In *De Rerum Natura* Book II, Lucretius describes the succession of generations as runners in a relay race passing the torch of life: “*et quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt*” — “and like runners they pass on the torch of life.”

The image carries its own argument. The torch is either burning or it is not. There is no third condition for a torch: not “somewhat alight,” not “pre-ignited,” not “cooling toward neither state.” The flame either lives in the wood or it does not. The moment it goes out, what remains is not a transitional state — it is cold, dark, inert matter. Fire and its absence are the two conditions, and they leave no gap between them.

What Lucretius uses for life and death, the same logic covers pleasure and pain. Either the warmth of pleasure is present or it is not. If it is not, what remains is not an intermediate — it is the cold state, which has its own name.

The Storm and the Shore — Safety or Peril

De Rerum Natura opens Book II with one of the most famous images in Latin poetry: the man standing safely on shore watching a great storm at sea. “*Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*” — “Sweet it is, when the great sea is troubled by winds, to watch from land another’s great toil.”

The image is explicitly about pleasure and its opposite. The man on the shore is safe; the sailors are in danger. These are not points on a spectrum. You are either in the storm or you are not. You are either battered by waves and wind or you are standing on solid ground watching. The coastline is an absolute boundary — cross it in one direction and you are in the sea; step back and you are not. There is no zone between the two that is neither shore nor storm.

Lucretius uses this as a picture of the contrast between the Epicurean life and the life of those without philosophy. The man who has secured the foundations of his understanding stands on the shore. Everyone else is in the water. The image does not allow for a middle position.

The Full Vessel — Complete or Not Complete

In the opening of Book VI of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius describes a life whose cup is already full — the man who has reached the limit, who has attained what pleasure is capable of delivering, and for whom additional accumulation adds nothing because the vessel is already filled to the brim.

The image of the full vessel is not merely decorative. It makes a specific argument about limits: a cup that is full is fully full. There is no gradation between “full” and “fully full.” The filled state IS the complete state. When you pour into a full cup, the liquid does not gradually become “more full than full” — it spills, because the condition of fullness has already been reached and

is already total.

This applies directly to the binary of pleasure and pain. The removal of pain does not produce a half-state that is “not quite pleasure yet.” When the cup of pain is emptied, the cup of pleasure is full. The limit has been reached. Fullness is not an approach toward something further — it is the thing itself, arrived.

Health and Sickness — The Medical Binary

Epicurus explicitly compared philosophy to medicine and its practitioners to physicians. This was not a casual metaphor. He meant that the philosopher, like the physician, deals with a condition that is either present or absent — and that the goal of the art is to move the patient from one state to the other.

A physician examining a patient recognizes exactly two conditions: the body is either functioning as it should, or it is not. There is no clinical state called “neither healthy nor sick.” Such a state has no medical meaning. Either the infection is present or it has cleared. Either the fever is there or it is gone. When sickness is absent, health IS present — not as a separate subsequent achievement but as the immediate condition of its absence.

The Epicurean applies the same diagnosis to the whole of life. Either the pain of fear, anxiety, or bodily suffering is present, or it is not. When it is not, pleasure is present — because those are the only two things a feeling can be.

Sleep and Waking — Experience or Its Absence

Lucretius returns repeatedly to the analogy between death and dreamless sleep. The argument about death — that we need not fear it because it is simply the absence of experience — depends on the same binary. Either you are awake and experiencing, or you are in dreamless sleep and experiencing nothing. These are the two states of consciousness, and they leave no room for a third kind of being-conscious-but-not-experiencing.

The same binary holds for the sentient life more broadly. Either sensation is occurring or it is not. Either pleasure or pain is present, or sensation itself is absent — which for a living, functioning body means we have crossed from the question of what we feel into the question of whether we feel at all.

Part Two: Modern Illustrations

The ancient examples carry the greatest authority because they are Epicurus's own instruments. But the same binary appears wherever nature or human technology has produced a condition that genuinely admits of no third state. The following examples work because they are real, not because they have been constructed to illustrate a point.

The Cardiac Monitor — Wave or Flatline

A cardiac monitor displays exactly two conditions: the undulating wave of a living heartbeat, and the flat line that replaces it when the heart stops. Every person who has ever been in a hospital or watched a film knows both images and knows their meaning immediately.

The flatline is not neutral. It is not the absence of a condition while awaiting a verdict. It is a fully real, fully specific state with a name and a consequence. When the wave returns, life IS present. When it does not, death IS present. No third line exists on the monitor — not because the engineers were insufficiently creative, but because nature has provided exactly two conditions to display.

This is the most immediately visceral modern image for the Epicurean binary. The wave is pleasure; the flatline is the other thing.

The Earth from Orbit — Day Side and Night Side

A photograph of Earth from space shows the terminator — the line that divides the sunlit half from the half in shadow. On one side of that line, every surface is in full daylight. On the other side, every surface is in full darkness. The line between them is the sharpest natural boundary visible from space.

Darkness is not nothing. It is not the absence of a condition while a third option is considered. It is a fully real state that exists on every surface the sun does not reach. When light arrives, darkness does not diminish toward a neutral middle — it is gone, instantly and completely, and light IS there.

The Pregnant and the Not-Pregnant

A phrase that already exists in common speech precisely because the logic is already obvious: you cannot be a little pregnant. Either the biological process has begun or it has not. There is no state of “not-pregnant but also not-not-pregnant” that one occupies while the question is pending. The moment the condition is present, it IS present — entirely, not gradually, not partially.

This example works because it is already culturally established as the canonical illustration of a true binary, recognized by anyone who has heard it.

The Verdict — Guilty or Not Guilty

A jury returns exactly one of two verdicts: guilty, or not guilty. The court does not recognize a verdict of “neither convicted nor acquitted.” Such a verdict would have no legal meaning — and more importantly, it would have no logical meaning, because the verdict is defined as the answer to a yes-or-no question. The defendant either committed the act or did not. The jury either finds this established or does not.

“Not guilty” is not a neutral outcome. It is a full verdict with full legal force and full consequences. It IS a decision, not the absence of one.

The court of sensation works identically. Either the experience is pleasant or it is not. “Not painful” is not a hung jury. It is a verdict: pleasure.

The Relay Torch — Ancient Image, Permanent Truth

The image Lucretius gave us belongs equally in this section, because it requires no historical knowledge to understand. A burning torch and a cold, dark torch: two objects, one condition present in one and absent in the other. No one needs to be told which is which. The eye reads the binary before the mind processes it.

The Logical Form — Argument Without Image

Two further examples work at the level of pure logic rather than picture, and are worth noting for that reason even though they do not reduce to a visual image.

True and false — every proposition is either true or false. There is no third truth-value called “neither true nor false.” This is the law of the excluded middle, and it applies directly: the proposition “I am experiencing pleasure” is either true or false. If false, its negation — “I am not experiencing pleasure” — is true. And “not experiencing pleasure” in a sentient being is the definition of experiencing pain.

Binary computing and the telegraph — at the physical level, every bit in a computer and every moment of a telegraph signal is either current-flowing or current-not-flowing. The entire digital world — every image, every text, every calculation — is built on a binary that has no middle position. A transistor gate is either conducting or it is not. A telegraph line is either carrying signal or it is carrying silence. These illustrate the principle with great logical clarity but do not reduce to a picture, and they require the audience to understand the underlying technology before the analogy can land.

The Common Structure

Every illustration in both lists shares the same structure:

1. There are exactly two conditions.
2. They are defined by each other — one is the presence of what the other lacks.
3. A third condition cannot be inserted between them because there is no logical space for it to occupy.
4. The moment one condition ends, the other IS present — not approaching, not about to become, but present.

This is what Epicurus means when he says pleasure and pain are the two feelings. He is not reporting an observation that could in principle have turned out otherwise. He is defining the terms in a way that closes the door on any third option by construction — the same way he closed the door on a third kind of existence between bodies and space.

The person who insists on a neutral middle ground between pleasure and pain is in the position of someone who insists there must be a third verdict besides guilty and not guilty, or a third state for a torch besides burning and not burning. A name can be invented for such a state — but naming is not finding. The test is not whether a word can be coined but whether the thing named can be located in actual felt experience. Anyone who proposes a neutral third feeling must eventually describe what it is like to be in it; and when they do, every description will draw on either pleasant or unpleasant qualities — because feeling itself is what the binary describes, and feeling’s own report always comes back as one or the other. A neutral state that can be felt as neither pleasant nor unpleasant cannot be felt at all, which means it is not a feeling. This is precisely what Epicurus warned against at the opening of the *Letter to Herodotus*: words whose referents cannot be located in actual experience produce endless dispute without result. The invented vocabulary for a neutral third feeling is a perfect specimen

of the empty word — a name pointing at nothing that can be distinguished from the two states that are already there. What exists, when pain is absent, is the other of the only two things there are — which is pleasure, present, real, and complete.