

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

Post by "Todd" of May 21, 2026 at 1:54 PM

The Graphic

I actually like the graphic better than the article.

Maybe replace alive/dead with life/death - it offends my sense of grammar to have 2 pairs of nouns and then a pair of adjectives.

The Article

I see that you've tried to address my feedback in the article. Unfortunately I think it only adds to the confusion. If you need that much explanatory material, I think there must be a better way to say what you are trying to say.

My recommendation is to remove all references to, and explanations of, the limit of pleasure. Re-word the material to make it clear in all cases that you are referring to specific instances of feelings and not the sum of the individual's total experience at a given moment. **But not by including lots of explanatory language!** Rather by using language that makes it unambiguous.

For example, the first paragraph is pretty good, clearly focused on a specific instance of feeling:

Quote

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.

The next paragraph right away starts confusing matters...

Quote

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.

As far as I know, the critics weren't talking about specific feelings. They were talking about the overall experience of the individual. It was the downstream consequences that they were arguing about. In this case, I think you could just drop this entire paragraph. It also flows better that way.

Edit: if you think it is important to have some kind of "why this matters", I think would be fine to talk about the limit of pleasure / absence of pain there. I just think it should be kept out of the material that is trying to convey that there are 2 and only 2 feelings.

Sedley

I have only skimmed it at this point, but it looks very interesting. Thanks for bringing it to my attention. I'm sure I'll have more to say after I spend some more time digesting it. (Interestingly, he seems to say that Epicurus believed the pursuit of pleasure is non-rational. 🤔)