

## **[Toby Sherman's Ancient Guide To Modern Well-being] That article I mentioned at the on line Wednesday 8/17 meeting**

**Post by “kochiekoch” of August 18, 2022 at 6:17 AM**

I like Toby Sherman's take on Epicurean pleasure. 😊 See what you think:

[ShermanT.pdf \(exeter.ac.uk\)](#)

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:07 AM**

Lots of good stuff in that which will require several posts from me to begin to tackle. One thing I want to memorialize is this list from Bentham which may be useful in future discussions:

Bentham’s famous calculus provides six criteria for judging the true value of a pleasure or pain, as considered by the one who feels it:

- Intensity: how strongly the pleasure or pain is felt.
  - Duration: the length of time that the pleasure or pain extends for.
  - Certainty or uncertainty: the likelihood that the pleasure or pain will actually occur.
  - Propinquity or remoteness: the closeness or distance of the pleasure or pain to the subject.
  - Purity: how much a pleasure is tempered by accompanying pains, and vice versa.
  - Fecundity: how likely the pleasure or pain is to produce more pleasures and pains.<sup>51</sup>
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**Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:10 AM**

But the thrust of the article is in sections like 5.6, which I think we will find leads us in a familiar and dangerous direction, a view that is easy to interpret as practical asceticism:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2639-toby-sherman-s-ancient-guide-to-modern-well-being-that-article-i-mentioned-at-th/>

"However, there is another way of thinking about pleasure, as simply the absence of pain. On this conception, to satisfy all one's desires is to experience perfect pleasure. Adding to the sum total of satisfied desires cannot increase one's pleasure further, whereas failing to satisfy any of them can diminish it. The only way is down. If we think of pleasure in this way, the maximising strategy is not merely risky in practice, for the reasons described above; it is theoretically incoherent. Multiplying desires cannot lift one above the point of perfect contentment; it can only create occasions for dissatisfaction. The only coherent strategy, if pleasure is limited, is a perfectionist one: we ought to limit our desires as far as possible, with a view to minimising dissatisfaction."

But this is not the end of the article.....

Or IS it his conclusion:

"Epicurus conceived of pleasure in the way I have outlined, as the absence of pain;

this conception underlies his ascetic philosophy of life. In the rest of this thesis I want to achieve two things. Firstly, I want to present Epicurean ethics in the strongest light possible, defending it against certain common objections. Secondly, I want to demonstrate that Epicurus was correct in his belief that there is a limit to pleasure, and therefore that perfectionism is the best method to attaining a good and pleasant life."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 7:18 AM**

Oooh I have to think that this statement on page 52 is going to produce very very very unwelcome results:

"Within Epicureanism, pain is the fundamental element - pleasure consists of the removal or the absence of pain."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 7:21 AM**

And there we have in 8.2 the standard way to focus on pain as the main issue of life:

"8.2ii Kinetic and katastemic pleasure

The difference between mental and physical pleasures is not the only distinction drawn by Epicurus. Another, perhaps more important, is between pleasures that are active, kinetic, and static, katastemic.<sup>87</sup> Understanding the difference requires one to bear in mind that pleasures have value only with reference to pains and wants."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 7:25 AM**

He is absolutely right here about "this" being the greatest obstacle to accepting the philosophy of Epicurus. If I thought "the final end is katastematic pleasure" I would reject Epicurus myself - but I don't think it is or that that there is any persuasive reason to believe this:

"Pleasures beyond the absence of pain

These, then, are the basic principles of the Epicurean theory of pleasure. The final end in life is katastemic pleasure, which is limited to the absence of pain in body and mind. This state of peace is dependent on having few or no unsatisfied desires. Immediately, a problem appears: it seems highly counter-intuitive to say that pleasure is limited at the absence of pain. This may be the greatest obstacle to accepting the philosophy of Epicurus."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 7:32 AM**

oh my oh my oh my!!!

"Habituation is perhaps the most important Epicurean technique: the whole philosophy focusses on limiting and changing one's desires in order to avoid unnecessary pain. By realising we don't need certain things and that they don't have value, we can reduce and eventually eliminate our desire for them. This process can involve both introspection - i.e. thinking about the objects of desire and questioning why we want them - and practice, such as living in a simpler fashion and realising that we are satisfied with less. The priority targets of this technique should of course be the damaging unnatural desires and then the risky unnecessary ones, but it's also worth a shot to reduce those that are necessary."

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:34 AM**

How many oh mys should I string together for this one???

"Even if we work to habituate ourselves to be satisfied with less, there will always be

some desires that remain, and continue to distress us to at least a small extent. We will always desire some food and warmth. However, this is not a problem, as we have seen, since food and warmth are both biological needs. Sex is a different matter. Since lack of it does not cause physical harm, it would be better not to want it at all. All sex does is sooth a pang that needn't be there in the first place. Ideally, we would have a naturally low sex drive, or habituate ourselves to not want sex. As that may not be possible, the desire should be managed sensibly, like hunger, so it doesn't become a burden or a pain."

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:37 AM**

"It doesn't matter what the Epicurean is currently doing: as long as they are doing it while possessing ataraxia and aponia, it is the most pleasurable activity there is."

I can't imagine a straighter path leading to the cave and it's bread and water than this attitude taken literally.

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:40 AM**

"One

e thing about Epicurus' view of pleasure that may be hard to stomach is that it is

entirely negative. Although it is true that every desire brings with it an increased chance of dissatisfaction and distress, not much attention is paid to the benefits of desires which are successfully satisfied."

I would say this statement applies to the writer 's view, not to Epicurus' view....

## **Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:42 AM**

"

According to the Epicurean account of desire, achieving one's heart's desire is no better than not having one."

This guy can really turn a phrase. He does a great job highlighting the issues!

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## **Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:46 AM**

Another brilliant statement of the issue - but I would say totally misguided. This is not the way Epicurus himself or any documented Epicurean ever lived or could live, obsessing over the elimination of sensual desire:

"Although this philosophy is not at all ascetic, it is disconcertingly hostile to desire. We are more accustomed to the notion that the bigger our hopes and dreams the better. If we fail to satisfy our grand desires then we will suffer, it's true, but at least we will have tried. Those people who lack desire, we think, may be content, but they have no chance of attaining anything great. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Indeed, there seems to be something timid about limiting desires to avoid dissatisfaction. Making sense of Epicurus' counter-intuitive claims about desire is very similar to

confronting the difficulties around the limits of pleasure. What must be demonstrated is that additional, unnecessary desires (even when satisfied) don't add anything. This is not as difficult as first appears, as long as we remember that pleasure cannot be extended beyond the point of contentment: perfect contentment is so complete that it cannot be bettered. Referring to this state as one of having no desires is misleading, and it is no wonder that this sounds unattractive. More accurately, this state is one of having every desire fulfilled, which means having everything we want now, and being completely confident of getting everything we want in the future. By definition, the fully-satisfied person can't gain any more satisfaction. Additional desires create pain, and satisfying those desires removes that pain. Therefore, it is true that continually satisfying more desires does provide more pleasure, but only by creating more discontent to dispel, and the level of pleasure and satisfaction, even with constant success, never rises above that of the person who is content with little. This should mean, if our understanding of Epicurus is correct, that in the last

scenario, that of having both money and food, Jack loses any advantage. Jill is perfectly content, as all of her desires are satisfied. Can we really say that Jack is any better off, in any meaningful way, given that both have everything they want? If we remember that the state of all-desires-satisfied is one of perfection, rather than mere contentment, it seems clear that additional desires have no power to better that situation."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 8:02 AM**

Ok in Section 12 at the end he attempts to use Gosling and Taylor to take a nonstandard view of katastematic pleasure - redefining it to include "active" pleasures - which is not the way these terms are normally used. To go down that path would put an entirely different spin on everything he wrote beforehand.

He's right IMO to cite Gosling and Taylor that pleasure isn't pleasure unless it is experienced, but I would say he fails to make a convincing case that all this supports his ultimate view that the best way to pursue the best life is to limit every desire you possibly can.

This is a very intelligent article which I really glad Steve posted. It does an excellent job of framing a question on which it is important for Everyone to know where they stand.

Is pain the focus of life, and is the best approach to life that of reducing all your desires to an absolute minimum?

My interpretation of Epicurus leads me to conclude: No!

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 8:10 AM**

Kalosyni raised the point in a post yesterday that the "cave and bread and water" analogy may be overly dramatic and not describe the real world issue of people who in fact focus on fleeing pain for a variety of well justified reasons - and she is right. There are many people in many circumstances who have no real choice but to deal with pressing real-world pains.

This article, on the other hand, is the issue I am referring to in the analogy. This article is an example of a well researched and argued paper by a highly intelligent person who is in fact arguing (though I suspect not actually living himself) the viewpoint that according to Epicurus

the very best life is the one with the fewest desires. That's the meaning and purpose of the "cave and bread and water" analogy - to dramatize that exactly that goal is being held up by some people as the ultimate Epicurean lifestyle.

Were we to adopt such a viewpoint every normal pleasure in life which we choose to pursue - especially those by which Epicurus said he would not know the good without -make us more and more "bad Epicureans."

No more chocolate, no more hugs, no more sex, no more joy, no more delight - according to this viewpoint only by setting the elimination of those from our lives could we achieve ataraxia and aponia and the goal of life.

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### **Post by "Don" of August 18, 2022 at 8:58 AM**

That's a lot of commentary on [Cassius](#) 's part and I haven't read all of his or the full paper. So, I'll have to dive into the paper and [Cassius](#) 's response later. In a cursory glance at both works (paper and posts), I'm not sure I \*fully\* agree with either but they do provide good food for thought and discussion.

Thanks for posting [kochiekoch](#) !

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 9:42 AM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

I'm not sure I \*fully\* agree with either but they do provide good food for thought and discussion.

Thanks for posting kochiekoch !

Yes absolutely.

VS74. In a philosophical discussion he who is defeated gains more, since he learns more.

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### **Post by "Kalosyni" of August 18, 2022 at 9:58 AM**

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2639-toby-sherman-s-ancient-guide-to-modern-well-being-that-article-i-mentioned-at-th/>

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

According to the Epicurean account of desire, achieving one's heart's desire is no better than not having one."

This guy can really turn a phrase. He does a great job highlighting the issues!

These interesting excerpts you've posted Cassius (I haven't read the article yet).

What came to my mind after reading this particular one, was a concept from Hinduism - "Divine Lila (Leela)" - which translates as "Divine Play" and in a very simplified sense could be thought of just as in Shakespeare's quote:

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players"

Ultimately there could be a kernel of truth in "achieving one's heart's desire is no better than not having one" -- yet thinking this way about desire makes life not worth living, and misses the point of making meaning out of life and the human condition ---- The show must go on! We must play the play and engage in life fully. And Epicurus says to make choices wisely -- and my own interpretation is to make choices which lead to a "sweet life" filled with joys of the heart.

This article just proves the importance of needing to explain that the Epicurean aim is to live joyfully. And also the need to define what is a joyful life and how to create one.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2022 at 10:30 AM**

Yes Kalosyni I started to make more comments that his train of thought sounds like pure Buddhism or something similar to me, but I decided not to inflame the issues any further til people do some reading and we get the discussion going.

It is a very well written article that is excellent for revealing these issues.

And to say something positive, I think he is exactly where most of us are on the issue of "virtue" as being purely instrumental and not something in itself.

Again, from a practical point of view I doubt he personally loves any differently than any of us do. What we are grappling with here is that question of how to express the ultimate goals / conclusions of the philosophy in the most sound way - a way that closes all doors to dramatically wrong interpretations about attitude toward life.

It's almost like the issue is whether the glass is half full or half empty - is the real focus of Epicurean philosophy Pleasure - or Pain?

I don't think it is satisfactory even to say both.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of August 18, 2022 at 11:38 AM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

It's almost like the issue is whether the glass is half full or half empty - is the real focus of Epicurean philosophy Pleasure - or Pain?

I don't think it is satisfactory even to say both.

I think it is both pleasure and pain, because "choices and avoidances" are very important.

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### **Post by “Eikadistes” of August 18, 2022 at 12:02 PM**

Epicurus never wrote that *The Greatest Good* is the *Removal of Pain*. He always identifies *The Greatest Good* as *Pleasure*. I think the concept of *Removal of Pain* is really only relevant with regards to the "limit" of Pleasure, and how to measure it. But *anti-Pain* is not the goal, just a measuring stick. *Pleasure* is the goal, and sometimes pain is necessary for a greater pleasure. Focusing on the *Removal of Pain* as a person's goal might lead them to miss out on rewarding challenges.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 12:15 PM**

#### [Quote from Nate](#)

Epicurus never wrote that The Greatest Good is the Removal of Pain. He always identifies The Greatest Good as Pleasure. I think the concept of Removal of Pain is really only relevant with regards to the "limit" of Pleasure, and how to measure it. But anti-Pain is not the goal, just a measuring stick. Pleasure is the goal, and sometimes pain is necessary for a greater pleasure. Focusing on the Removal of Pain as a person's goal might lead them to miss out on rewarding challenges.

That's a very clear and simple way of stating it.

I continue to think that the background context which these "Pain-focused" people are missing is that the "limit" issue comes up in the specific context of the Platonic argument that "something which has no limit cannot be the greatest good, because it cannot be made better." Epicurus needed to establish a conceptual "limit of pleasure" and he did so very well, but he never intended that issue of a limit to overwrite everything else he ever wrote about "Pleasure" as we ordinarily feel and understand the word being the greatest good.

These guys are conflating "limit of pleasure" as if it were intended to denote some specific type of pleasure, so they run around in circles trying to equate "limit of pleasure" with ataraxia, aponia, kinetic, or katastematic pleasure. As I see it they are trying to define apples in terms of oranges and they will never get there with that approach. Worse, they make the entire issue hopelessly muddy. A two year old, or the proverbial newborn animals of any type, can simply by feeling run circles around that analysis, but these guys are hell-bent on pursuing it because it equates with their views of Stoicism and Buddhism.

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## Post by “kochiekoch” of August 18, 2022 at 1:31 PM

LOL!!! Well..., I did ask you what you thought. 😊

Thanks for all the extensive replies so quickly! 😊

Although, I don't think the author is just saying that we should forgo ALL pleasures, for lack of pain; in as much as we reach that perfect level of contentment only rarely. Then, chocolate, hugs, sex, roller coaster rides, etc. serve to make us happier.

It's all choice and avoidance, so you're not causing yourself more trouble than it's worth.

I await your many replies! 😊

Steve

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## Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 1:37 PM

### [Quote from kochiekoch](#)

Although, I don't think the author is just saying that we should forgo ALL pleasures, for lack of pain; in as much as we reach that perfect level of contentment only rarely. Then, chocolate, hugs, sex, roller coaster rides, etc. serve to make us happier.

So in other words, it is only your failure to succeed in being a good Epicurean that makes it appropriate for you to engage in chocolate, hugs, sex, and roller coaster rides???

If that is the case then may none of us succeed in becoming good Epicureans!!



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## Post by “Don” of August 18, 2022 at 1:53 PM

Okay, so the Epicurean ideal (in the widest, non-Platonic sense!!) is the untroubled, blessed life of the gods, content in their incorruptible existence.

So, I have no problem with aspiring to living a life of pleasurable fulfillment and contentment. A mind untroubled by unfulfilled desires? Without nagging anxiety? Experiencing pleasure as it becomes available, varying my well-being? That sounds pretty good actually.

I see an Epicurean way of life as being a path toward a goal, and a goal that is met from time to time and then back on the path.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of August 18, 2022 at 2:25 PM

I'll use this opportunity to get back on my desire soapbox. Desires are what we actually work with; pleasure and pain are reactions. I've got a working hypothesis that the categories of desires describe the upper and lower limits of desires (not pleasures), and that by defining these for oneself, a person develops a personal sweet spot for working with desires in order to

discover what leads to their most pleasant life.

In the Principle Doctrines, it seems that the Doctrines on pleasure go from more theoretical to more practical as you progress through the Doctrines. So I'm also thinking that [PD18-21](#) may actually be more pertinent, once one has worked through the earlier ones. I think that they build on each other. After that come the PDs on desires. One's understanding has to progress through the sequence in order to gain a practical understanding of the ethics.

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### Post by “kochiekoch” of August 18, 2022 at 2:26 PM

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

So in other words, it is only your failure to succeed in being a good Epicurean that makes it appropriate for you to engage in chocolate, hugs, sex, and roller coaster rides???

If that is the case then may none of us succeed in becoming good Epicureans!!

No, perfection is a high bar. The [Epicurean gods](#) are perfect, but us, not so much. As good Epicureans, any kind of pleasure is welcome as it improves our state of mind! 😊

Steve

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### Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 2:29 PM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

So, I have no problem with aspiring to living a life of pleasurable fulfillment and contentment. A mind untroubled by unfulfilled desires? Without nagging anxiety? Experiencing pleasure as it becomes available, varying my well-being? That sounds pretty good actually.

I think the issue presented in the article is probably fairly stated by asking something like:

And are you willing to embrace the idea of reducing your desires in every way possible, even cutting the "necessary" desires to a minimum, as the proper method of reaching a goal which is defined to be that of having zero desires which are unsatisfied? The implicit issue here is that you could have many more desires fulfilled if you seek them knowing that some of them may be unfulfilled.

Is the abolition of every possible pain so important to you that you would in fact voluntarily embrace life in a cave on bread and water so as to banish the possibility of experiencing the slightest pain?

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### Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 2:33 PM

#### [Quote from kochiekoch](#)

No, perfection is a high bar. The [Epicurean gods](#) are perfect, but us, not so much. As good Epicureans, any kind of pleasure is welcome as it improves our state of mind! 😊

"Is welcome" sounds kind of like: "if it happens to fall out of the sky and hit me on the head."

Probably the issue, in terms of "desire," is more like: "Is it appropriate for you to desire, and act toward obtaining, any kind of additional pleasure once you are in the cave and have your bread and water?"

If so, why?

Because under one reading of the letter to Menoecus it is only when you are in pain that you have any need of pleasure.

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### Post by “kochiekoch” of August 18, 2022 at 2:52 PM

LOL!!!! Having pleasure fall out of the sky is good. 😊 Or are easily available.

Remember, it's choice and avoidance. Avoid those pleasures from the sky that will crack your skull. 😊

I see your cave analogy. Actually, the bread and water in the cave would be a very painful life. I'm told, that in prison, misbehaving prisoners are put in solitary confinement as a punishment. Denied the company, of other people, they suffer terribly both mentally and physically. It's the sort of thing the ACLU seeks to ban. We are social animals.

Steve

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of August 18, 2022 at 6:17 PM**

In the introduction the author asserts:

Quote

"However, Epicureanism does differ in one crucial respect to all forms of modern hedonism, in that it treats pleasure as strictly negative or privative: pleasure is simply the absence or removal of pain. Here, my reading departs from that of Hershenov and Woolf, both of whom try to find a place in Epicureanism for a positive conception of pleasure..."

So we need to track down Hershenov and Woolf's writings -- since we here on the forum have a positive conception of pleasure.



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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of August 18, 2022 at 6:23 PM**

Raphael Woolf - "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?"

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4182759>

David B. Hershenov - "A More Palatable Epicureanism"

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20464366>

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### **Post by “Don” of August 18, 2022 at 7:08 PM**

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2639-toby-sherman-s-ancient-guide-to-modern-well-being-that-article-i-mentioned-at-th/>

The Hershenov paper mostly has to do with the Epicurean attitude on death. Here's the conclusion:

Quote

This paper sought to illuminate an important aspect of the wrongness of killing while defending the claim that death is not a harm. If this endeavor has been successful, readers can accept what is right about the Epicurean claim-that death is not a harm and an evil-without having to abandon the very reasonable claims that (in most cases) more life is good, it is prudent to make efforts to stay alive, allowing death when rescue is easy is wrong, and killing the innocent is very evil and should be prevented and punished. This should remove much of the motivation they may otherwise have had to misconstrue Epicurus's challenge (i.e., change the subject) or to meet it with some very controversial metaphysical theories about existence, reality, and time.

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2022 at 7:45 PM**

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

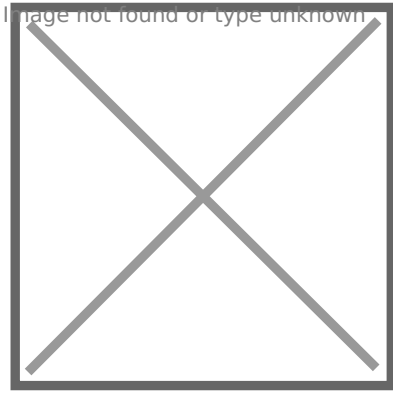
So we need to track down Hershenov and Woolf's writings -- since we here on the forum have a positive conception of pleasure.

it is hard to believe that anyone who as a "negative conception of pleasure" has very much positive to contribute to Epicurean philosophy! 😊

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**Post by “Don” of August 19, 2022 at 1:54 AM**

Just came across this paper:



### [The Epicurean Morality of Vergil's "Bucolics"](#)

Vergil's "Bucolics" can be read as an Epicurean therapy to heal the disturbance of civil war.  
[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

I skimmed it, but it's an interesting take on comparing Lucretius' work with Vergil's Bucolics and Georgics.

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### **Post by "Pacatus" of August 23, 2022 at 3:29 PM**

#### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

I'll use this opportunity to get back on my desire soapbox.

"A Soapbox Named Desire"? 😊

(Apologies to Tennessee Williams)