By Pleasure We Mean Absence of Pain - All Experience Which Is Not Painful Is Pleasurable

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1. Explanation

Find out more in our Ethics Forum and our Discussion Guide. Also, click here to listen to our Special Lucretius Today Podcast Episode 269 devoted to this topic.

One might think that stirring philosophers, priests, and politicians to exasperation on the topics of "Gods," and "Virtue" would be enough of a revolution for any one philosopher. But Epicurus's commitment to the truth led him to drive forward to correct the erroneous view of "Pleasure" as well. While virtually everyone before him had properly understood "pleasure" as including sensory stimulation, Epicurus saw this definition as perversely narrow. Epicurus therefore turned to clarifying how the term "pleasure" properly applies to more than sensory stimulation, just as the term "gods" properly applies only to non-supernatural beings.

Epicurus realized that since Nature has given us only two feelings, if we are alive and feeling anything at all we then are feeling one or the other of the two. That means if we are not feeling pain, what we are feeling is in fact pleasure. This means that "Pleasure" involves much more than the sensory stimulation, which we have been trained by priests and virtue-based philosophers to consider the only meaning of the term. Once we understand that all experiences in life that are not painful are rightly considered to be pleasurable, Epicurus taught us that we can then use the term "Absence of Pain" as conveying exactly the same meaning as "Pleasure." The benefit of this perspective is that Pleasure be comes something that is widely available through a myriad of ways of life that do not require great pain to experience. Pleasure becomes a workable term to describe the goal of life, and a life of continuous pleasure in which pleasures predominate over pain becomes possible for all but the very few who face extreme circumstances (and even they need not face more pain than pleasure indefinitely.)

Just as we should understand "gods" to refer to living beings who are blessed and imperishable, and "virtue" to refer to actions which lead to happiness, we should understand "pleasure" to refer to all experiences of life that are not painful. Torquatus preserves for us this explanation: "Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension.“ (On Ends 1:38)

In typical Epicurean fashion, however, let's get right to the main points: **Epicurus taught that there are no supernatural gods, there is no life after death, and that the goal of life according to Nature is "Pleasure."** The first two of these are clear, and we explore the implications in detail here at EpicureanFriends. What Epicurus meant by "Pleasure," however, has been disputed for two thousand years. That controversy continues today, with some - often influenced by Stoicism or Buddhism or other non-Epicurean viewpoints - interpreting Epicurus as advising a life of asceticism, total withdrawal from society, and the pursuit of "tranquility" above all else.

In contrast, those in the ancient world who knew the Epicureans best were clear: they understood Epicurus as teaching that "Pleasure," and not "Tranquility" or any other *particular* pleasure, should be considered to be the highest good and the ultimate goal of life. **The implications of focusing on "Pleasure" or "Tranquility" are so profound that the question should be addressed right at the start of any discussion about Epicurus**. Additional citations are here, but what follows will be enough to acquaint you with the issues, and with how Epicurus is interpreted at EpicureanFriends.com:

Rather than limiting pleasure to sensory stimulation (the common view) or tranquility (the ascetic view) alone, Epicurus taught that "pleasure" should be considered to include *every experience in life that is not painful.* Epicurus held this to include *every non-painful experience of body and mind*, and he held that this perspective is correct because Nature gives us only "pleasure" and "pain" by which to determine what to choose and what to avoid. From Epicurus' point of view, if we are alive and feeling anything at all, we are feeling *either pleasure or pain, with no middle ground or third alternative.* From this perspective, every agreeable experience of life, whether of the body, of the mind, or of the "spirit," comes within the meaning of "pleasure."

> Quote from Diogenes Laertius 10:34
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> ”The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined.“

> Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:38
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> Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension.“

If you are not feeling pain you are feeling pleasure, and so to Epicurus the word "pleasure" includes not only *agreeable sensory stimulation of mind and body* but also *all normal and healthy experiences of mind and body.* Both are not painful, and both are therefore pleasurable. Pleasure therefore includes every non-painful moment of life of mind or body, whether "in motion" or "at rest," and not just moments of stimulation:

> Quote from Torquatus, Speaking For Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:39
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> For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure.

Seen in this way, Epicurean philosophy is neither "hedonistic" nor "ascetic," as those terms are generally viewed today. Instead, Epicurus assures us that all types of healthy non-painful function of both body and mind are pleasurable and therefore desirable, and in this way a life full of pleasure is attainable.

To illustrate how it is possible to grasp the view that there is no neutral state or third alternative, a parallel may be drawn with Epicurean physics. In Epicurean physics, every specific location in the universe is occupied either by one of two things, matter or void, with no mixture or third alternative.

We can view human life in a similar way. Epicurean ethics holds that everything in life as either agreeable or disagreeable, in other words pleasure or pain. When we remind ourselves of the vast nothingness that passed before our birth and will pass after our death, we see that every moment of life when we are not in pain is worthy of being considered agreeable and pleasurable, and can in fact be so if we approach life with the proper attitude. Even in those moments when we face pain in *some* part of our experience, we can look to the *other* parts of our mental and physical experience to find pleasure, and thus more reason for joy than for vexation.

Some will ask: "Are not bodies mixtures of atoms and void, and human lives mixtures of pleasure and pain, and are not these mixtures a third alternative?" The Epicurean response is that mixtures are not third alternatives that destroy the integrity of component parts. In Physics, "Bodies" are properly viewed as existing as combinations of matter and void, but within bodies, matter and void are properly viewed as retaining their individual identities. Likewise, a human life as a whole is properly viewed as existing as a combination of pleasures and pains, but within a life, pleasures and pains are properly viewed as retaining their individual identities. Despite the difference in their levels of observation, both perspectives are valid.

As a distinguished expert on Epicurus has written:

> Quote from Professor David Sedley, In "Epicurus' Rejection of Determinism"
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> "Almost uniquely among Greek philosophers [Epicurus] arrived at what is nowadays the unreflective assumption of almost anyone with a smattering of science, that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter; but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth."

Epicurus rejects prevailing views of ethics by recognizing that a*bsence of pain is pleasure, just as absence of pleasure is pain. Any feeling which is not a pleasure is a pain, and any feeling which is not a pain is a pleasure.* The value of this perspective is that it lays the groundwork for living a life in which **pleasure predominates over pain and continuous happiness is possible**:

> Quote from Torquatus, Speaking For Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:62
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> For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.

This sweeping redefinition of the life of pleasure - rather than the gluttony or asceticism which his detractors assert - is the hallmark of the Epicurean approach to living. As one biographer of Epicurus observed:

> Quote from Norman DeWitt, "Epicurus And His Philosophy"

> The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. **The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.**

In this revolutionary approach to the best life, to the dismay of other philosophers, "Pleasure" is identified as the Supreme Good, rather than Virtue or Piety or Tranquility or Rationality or any other conventional ideal. The Epicureans stated this boldly and emphatically:

> Quote from Torquatus, Speaking For Epicurus In Cicero's On Ends
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> We are inquiring, then, into what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in Pleasure; Pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, and Pain the Chief Evil.

> Quote from Torquatus, Speaking For Epicurus In Cicero's On Ends
>
> "Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance. When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better?" (*On Ends* [40] XII)

Epicurus' rejection of commonplace assumptions was by no means limited to the prevailing definition of "pleasure." Epicurean philosophy leads to a re-examination of many other common misconceptions, including those regarding "gods," "virtue," "good and evil," and even the status of "logic."

In Epicurean terms, "gods" do exist, and it is important to act "virtuously," but "gods" are not supernatural or omniscient beings which create universes or control human affairs, and "virtue" is not desirable as an end it itself, but as a means of obtaining pleasure. "Good" and "evil" are not abstract absolutes, but are ultimately evaluations based on sensations of pleasure and pain felt by real living beings. "Dialectical logic" is rejected as misleading, while at the same time "Practical Reason" is embraced as essential for living happily. All of these are important topics to explore and clarify, and that's what we do here at EpicureanFriends.

- Quote from Vatican Saying 29

  For I would certainly prefer, as I study Nature, to announce frankly what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than to compromise with common

opinions, and thus reap the frequent praise of the many.

As the Epicureans held, "We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness. Life is wasted in procrastination, and each one of us dies while occupied."

2. Citations

1. Diogenes Laertius X-34 : ”The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined.“
2. On Ends Book One, 30 : ”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?
3. On Ends Book One, 38 : Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension.“
4. On Ends Book One, 39 : For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure.
5. On Ends Book Two, 9 : Cicero: “…[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'” Torquatus: “Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be.”
6. On Ends, Book Two, 11: Cicero: Still, I replied, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?” Torquatus: “Absolutely the same, indeed the greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be.” [Plane idem, inquit, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest. (Cic. Fin. 2.11)]
7. On Ends Book Two, 16 : “This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?”

3. Transcription of Lucretius Today Episode 269 - By Pleasure We Mean The Absence of Pain

The audio version of this podcast episode is available here.

Cassius:

Welcome to Episode 269 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote on the Nature of Things, the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com where we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

Today we're continuing our series on key doctrines of Epicurus. Last week, we discussed the central role that pleasure plays as the guide of life and as part of the Epicurean canon of truth. This week we're going to dive deeper and focus on the full meaning of the word pleasure, as Epicurus uses it, so that we can also get behind the real meaning of the phrase "absence of pain."

Now before we start let me say that the subject of this episode is one of the most controversial topics in Epicurean philosophy. There are other disputes, such as about Virtue, that are between Epicureans and Stoics, and the lines of battle between schools are very clearly drawn. As to the full meaning of the word "Pleasure," however, or as to the phrase "absence of pain," there is a major difference of opinion even among those who consider themselves to be Epicurean. So what you are going to hear today is one way of interpreting Epicurus, but by no means the only way. When you go out onto the internet you're going to read many different opinions, so be prepared to think about this issue closely, and make up your own mind which positions make the most sense to you.

Here we go:

There are many good people out there who think that they have a basic understanding of Epicurean philosophy, and that as a result of that basic understanding, all they need to do is go out and drink wine and eat cheese, and stay away from any kind of pain or exertion, as much as they possibly can - and that makes them an Epicurean. As we dive deeper into the texts, we're going to see that there is very good reason to believe that Epicurus had a much wider view of pleasure in mind when he discussed "absence of pain."

As we get started, it's important to understand that Epicurus builds his philosophy like an architect, with one platform resting on another. Epicurean philosophy starts with a view of the universe as being totally natural, with no supernatural gods - no ideal abstract virtues - and based on the movement of atoms through void in a totally natural way, and you can't let the implications of that foundation ever slip from your grasp if you want to understand the details of what Epicurus is talking about.

Epicurus was a philosopher, and as the founder of a school, he went to great effort to show his students how his own views were different, and better, than other schools. Epicurus was well aware that the leading schools of his day were based on Plato and Aristotle and others who had held that "Pleasure" was disreputable, ignoble, and absolutely unfit to be considered the goal of life. Epicurus also knew that the Cyreniacs before him had advocated for a central role of Pleasure, but the Cyreniacs had focused on ordinary active and bodily pleasures, and they not been successful in persuading many people that their position was correct.

Arguments similar to those that had been used against the Cyreniacs were preserved in Plato's dialogue "Philebus," and there is one argument in particular that is very relevant to today's discussion.

Plato had argued in *Philebus* that Pleasure could not be the goal of life because Pleasure can always be made better by adding more pleasure to it, and this argument meant that the pursuit of pleasure could never be satisfied - you could never find yourself at the best state of pleasure, because pleasure can always be made better by adding more pleasure to it. This was in contrast to virtue, Plato held, because virtue is supposedly complete in itself. A wise man, for example, is either perfectly wise, or he is not wise at all if he's making any mistakes

This line of argument may not impress us today, but in the world of Greek logic it was very persuasive, and it prevailed for hundreds of years to be cited by both Cicero and Seneca many years after Plato. It was a well-known argument, and Epicurus needed an answer both to it, and to other arguments against Pleasure, for example that it is impossible to continuously live in pleasure throughout our lives, because such pleasures are not always available to you.

What I will suggest to you today is that Epicurus' answer to these problems involved rejecting the presumptions of Plato and the rest that Pleasure involves only active bodily pleasures. Epicurus reasoned that yes - pleasure *does include* wine and cheese and the rest, but pleasure *also includes* all kind of mental experiences, not only of joy and delight but also of pleasurable appreciation of being alive, and confidence in our ability to life happily and avoid unnecessary and unmanageable pains.

Whereas the Cyreniacs had focused their attention on the ordinary bodily and mental pleasures directly in front of them, Epicurus held that it makes sense to look at pleasure from a much wider point of view. Epicurus held that life itself is pleasurable, no matter what we are doing, if we are not in pain, and that it therefore makes sense to expand our view of pleasure to include everything in our lives that is not painful.

Looking further at our lives as a whole, it also makes sense to evaluate the total experience of our lives, rather than just the immediate experiences of the moment. And from that point of view, it becomes possible to see how we can fill the total experience of our lives with as much pleasure as possible. Just as in the old story of the leaky vessel which can never be filled, Epicurus pointed out that if we consider our life as a whole to be like a vessel, and that if we fill any leaks in our life (of that vessel) that prevent it from being filled, then a life can be filled to the rim and even to overflowing with pleasures that crowd out all pains. This is a "big picture" look at pleasure vs pain, in which it is clear that you offset pains with pleasures that are greater than those pains, and that you work to maximize the pleasures in your life so that the only pains that remain are those that are absolutely necessary to achieve the happiest life through pleasure that is possible to you. While it might not be possible for many people - or any person - to have a completely pleasurable life with absolutely no pains, that's the same situation as those who extol "virtue" as the goal of life, as the good. Who in real life is absolutely virtuous? Yet that problem did not stop Plato or the Stoics from saying that virtue could be complete.

Epicurus answered that problem in the same way in the case of pleasure; Pleasure can be complete if the vessel of life is completely filled with pleasure. That answers the logical objection that it is impossible to satisfy the pursuit of pleasure - it puts pleasure on the same plane as virtue itself, and so you can see that there is no reason for any Epicurean to follow the path taken by Philebus in that dialogue of Plato who ended up giving in and admitting that pleasure could not be the goal. That kind of logical argument will force some people who support Pleasure to back down when they don't have the responsive argument that they need to show the fault in the logic of the Platonic argument. Epicurus provides the answer, the key to the Platonic argument, by showing that complete pleasure is as much theoretically possible as is complete virtue.

Before we move on from the implications of this "big picture" view of pleasure and pain, one more thing deserves comment. That is the problem that some people seem to have when they think that Epicurus is telling them that the most important thing for them to do with every moment of their life is to avoid any possibility of pain. From the big picture perspective, of course, that is not the way to look at life at all. You look at life as the net of all the pleasures and pains that you experience, so even when you must engage in certain painful activities, so long as the result is more pleasure than pain then you are making progress toward your goal of happiness through pleasure, because you are filling your life as much as possible with pleasures. Once you realize that the big picture result, rather than moment by moment experiences, is what you are really after, you can see that it makes no sense at all to focus on avoiding pain at every moment as the primary problem. No mortal human being is going to be able to abolish every moment of pain from their lives. To focus on avoiding pain at every moment is going to take your eyes off the target of living the happiest most pleasurable life possible.

And that's why it is also so important that Epicurus expanded his view of what constitutes pleasure, because the more pleasures that are available to you, the easier it is going to be to fill your vessel as close to the rim as possible. Epicurus saw that it was false to limit the application of the word Pleasure to bodily of mental stimulations. When we realize that life is short and that forever after death we cease to exist, we can mentally appreciate that simply being alive while not in pain is itself a very great pleasure. Just as our minds can be taught many other things, a proper philosophy of life can teach us to appreciate the pleasures that are available to us in thousands of ways, not the least of which is that of having confidence that we will not be tormented by supernatural gods, or consigned to a painful hell (or anything else painful) after death. This tremendously expanded recognition of pleasure makes it much easier to see that the pleasures of life can outweigh all but the worst of situations, and even in those terrible situations to which there is no pleasurable alternative, if the situation is bad enough we can always escape even the worst of tortures through death.

There's much more to say about all of this, but for now let's note that this viewpoint resolves the contradictions that some people think they see in Epicurean philosophy. Opponents such as Cicero argued that this kind of Pleasure is not Pleasure at all, and that we should reject Epicurus because he's changing the rules of the game, which the established leaders of philosophy have already set, and their number one rule is that Pleasure is something disreputable and ignoble. Opponents who are Stoic or Buddhist might say that Epicurus didn't include normal pleasures in his philosophy because he said that the highest pleasure is "Absence of Pain," and that means nothingness just like the Buddhists and the ascetics of the world say that it does.

Those views are false, but the majority of people who have been talking about Epicurus in the last fifty years seem to hold views that are very similar to those Stoic or Buddhist views. And what they will not tell you, and what you have to dig out of Epicurean philosophy for yourself and with the help of friends, is that Epicurus endorses all kinds of pleasure, active and stable, mental and bodily, and everything in between, because it's the faculty of Pleasure and Pain that Nature gives us as our true guide of life, rather than the Logic and the Supernaturalism that the other philosophers and the priests want you to believe.

We have a long way to go before we reach our final conclusions, but let's pull back for a moment and put this in practical terms. When you first reject supernatural religion and those who say that your job to be a "good person," instead of pursuing your own view of pleasure, you run into a problem that has to be dealt with, and that problem is that it's impossible to constantly experience nothing but stimulating pleasures.

We can't live every moment drinking wine, eating cheese, and pursuing the pleasures of sex or partying or mountain climbing. If we try to do that, we can expect disaster to result.

But are wine and cheese and sex and partying and mountain climbing all there is to pleasure? Maybe Nature provides you with many pleasurable options to pursue, and you just need to open your mind to pursuing them more intelligently.

That's where Epicurus saw that while active pleasures are good too, many of the most important experiences in life don't involve sensory stimulation at all. Many of the best pleasures arise, in fact, from our own mental processes, from our own thinking about our lives and appreciating how we can live happily.

And especially important to us in living pleasurably are those things that give us confidence in our ability to succeed in living happily.

Let's take a look at the first four of Epicurus' principle doctrines to see how this confidence works:

Doctrine One answers the priests and explains to us why we can have confidence that there are no supernatural gods plotting against us to cause us harm, or to bribe us to follow their rules, or to sentence us to torture in hell after we are dead.

Doctrine Two answers the concerns everyone has about death, and explains why we can have confidence that when we are dead we will suffer no pain or anguish of any kind, because we're not there to experience anything at all.

Doctrine Three answers the complaints of Plato and other philosophers, and tells us that the limit of pleasure can be reached when our lives are filled with pleasure, and that we need not worry that a life that is more pleasurable than painful is beyond our reach.

Doctrine Four answers the concerns we all have about facing pain, and gives us confidence that any pain in life that we do encounter will either be manageable, or, if it's severe enough, will be brief. Epicurus reminds us that there's no reason to fear anything as being truly terrible in life, when we know that there's nothing truly terrible in not living.

By now you should see the pattern that we embrace and combine both bodily and mental pleasures. There's nothing contradictory between those two, and in fact they mutually support each other.

As an example of that mutual support, think of the stimulation that many of us get from flying in jet planes. We take a window seat and looking out at the world below from 30,000 feet, and even the rush of takeoff and landing, are exciting and fun for most of us.

On the other hand, remember too that the only reason that most of us are willing to get on an airplane in the first place is that we have confidence in the engineering of the airplane and the professionalism of the pilot and the crew. We understand at least generally how airplanes work, and we have confidence due to that understanding that flying is not magic and we will be safe when we are doing it.

This feeling of confidence is itself a pleasure, if we take the time to think about it, and even if it isn't a pleasure of stimulative action, this feeling of confidence is something we can enjoy just the same, and it makes it possible for us to experience the stimulative pleasures that we would otherwise not have the confidence to undertake.

So as we go further today, once we understand how Epicurus arrived at his positions, we take that perspective and use it ourselves, widening our objectives beyond just wine and cheese parties so that we can find a net balance of pleasure in the way we live our own lives.

I've introduced a lot in this opening, but before we go further, let's drop back and examine what Epicurus had to say about pleasure and the absence of pain and how all this fits together.

Joshua:

Right, Cassius. And as with everything else in Epicurean philosophy, we are dealing with fragmentary sources. The text that deals most comprehensively with the ethics that survives is his summary in the letter to us. And starting in that text at the end of section 127, we get his views on pleasure in the relationship between pleasure and pain. And he starts this way, he says:

> Quote
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> *"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."*

And he continues, "When therefore we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligate and those that consistent sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us, or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind. For it is not continuous drinking and reveling, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table which produce a pleasant life but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."

Cassius, you started the episode by saying what a controversial issue we have on our plate today. And this, from the letter to Menoeceus, is very controversial in the academic literature. I'm also going to quote from a fragment of a lost work called Telos in Greek, on the end goal or on the end, very much like Cicero's Book de Finibus, in Latin, quoted by Diogenes Laertius in book ten of his Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, relentlessly ridiculed by Cicero and by Plutarch, and in that passage, as translated by CD Yonge in 1895, he says this:

> Quote
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> *"For I do not know what I should consider the good to be, if I put out of sight the pleasures which arise from flavors, and those which are derived from amatory pleasures, and from music, and from the contemplation of beauty."*

I think it's important to keep that one at hand any time we look at the letter to Menoeceus. Even though these are both written by Epicurus, they seem to be saying opposite things about pleasure. I think he's actually being very consistent here, because he's giving us an understanding of pleasure, but he's also adding to that a program of choice and avoidance to deny in that fragment from the last work on the end, that good food was pleasurable would to betray in yourself a muddled understanding of pleasure.

I think Epicurus doesn't do this. He acknowledges that luxurious foods are pleasurable. He acknowledges that drinking bouts are pleasurable. He acknowledges that music and dance and sex are all pleasurable, but it does not follow in any of these cases that we should necessarily pursue these things just because they are pleasure. This is why we have the program of choice and avoidance.

There's one other thing I want to say about the passage from the letter to Menoeceus, and that is the claim in section 130, in which he says:

> Quote
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> *"Plain savors bring us a pleasure equal to a luxurious diet, when all the pain due to want is removed, and bread and water produce the highest pleasure when one who needs them puts them to his lips."*

Our friend Don from the forum has prepared a presentation on this issue of bread and water, and he's gone into a study of the Greek language and the cultural context of the time and the agricultural and economic issues. And I recommend to anybody: Don't switch to just eating bread and water necessarily. I mean, you can choose to do that. But before you interpret Epicurus as ascetic on this point, I recommend people go to the YouTube channel (Cassius Amicus / EpicureanFriends) and watch Don's video because it is very good on this point.

Cassius, Epicurus says quite a lot of things here in the letter to Menoeceus. Where do you want to start?

Cassius

Given that our focus today is on absence of pain, the first thing I think we need to do is reinforce that there clearly is a question of terminology going on here. Epicurus himself says in the part that you've read that

there were people out there, even in his own time, who were misrepresenting or misunderstanding what Epicurus had to say about pleasure.

We can confirm this through Cicero. In On Ends Book two section 23 Cicero speaks to the Epicurean Torquatus, and says:

> Quote
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> *"At one time you mean by the word the very same thing which I've just said - a pleasant emotion affecting the senses - and you give it the description of consisting in motion and of causing variety. At another time you speak of some other higher pleasure which is susceptible of no addition whatsoever, but that it is present when every sort of pain is absent, and you call it a state, not motion. Let that then be pleasure."*

And then Cicero goes on and describes what Epicurus is talking about as two different things. Cicero says,

> Quote
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> *"…Not only that pleasure which you say consists in motion and which all men, whether living in cities or in the country, all men, in short, who speak Latin, call pleasure. But even that pleasure which no one but your sect calls pleasure at all."*

So after 200 years, Cicero, one of the leading smart men of Rome and a highly intelligent person, is saying Epicurus is using the word Pleasure differently than any other school uses the word.

So before we get any further, it's useful to emphasize to people that they should not be surprised to find what Epicurus wrote in the letter to Menoeceus needing more explanation, because you're in good company with Cicero. In fact, there's hardly any better way of getting a blank stare, or inviting an argument, than to say "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain." and stopping there without giving more of an explanation. Does "absence of pain" mean that you're asleep? Does absence of pain mean that you're under anesthesia? Does that mean that you're high on marijuana? What does it mean exactly to say that you are feeling no pain? Because that phrase - "I'm feeling no pain has been" largely identified in recent decades with the idea of being in some kind of drug-induced stupor. Is that what Epicurus was talking about? Of course, that's very very unlikely.

Cicero and the opponents of Epicurus want us to stop there, without an answer, and walk away from Epicurus confused, but we don't have to do that and we shouldn't do that.

Epicurus in his letter to Menoeceus was writing a short letter to a student, and Epicurus could expect that Menoeceus knew the rest of what Epicurus taught and therefore how to understand what he was saying without more background.

But we weren't alive then to be taught by Epicurus directly, so we have to look to other sources, such as you've done Joshua, where Epicurus is recorded to have said that he would not know what is good without these pleasures of sensory stimulation that he listed.

From this and other places we know with certainty that Epicurus included within the word Pleasure all of the normal, sensory, stimulative things that everyone recognizes as pleasure. Epicurus' enemies were all to happy to confirm that Epicurus embraced those normal pleasures because those other philosophers consider pleasures to be unworthy, and they wanted to discredit Epicurus by association.

So the starting point is to first realize that pleasure does include drinking wine and eating cheese, and lots of other activities that everyone understands to be pleasurable. So the answer to understanding Epicurus is not

to subtract experiences from Epicurus's view of Pleasure, but to add the experiences that the Platonists did not want to characterize as pleasure, but which are clearly pleasurable when you start to think about them from the Epicurean perspective.

As we also know, Cicero had asked:

> Quote
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> *"Who can avoid seeing that three states exist in the nature of things? First, the state of being in pleasure, secondly, that of being in pain, and thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are in this moment, and as you too, I imagine. Which is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain."*

This is another hint that shows us what Epicurus was doing. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Epicurus held that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, and that's what we see also in Epicurus' own Principle Doctrine three, where Epicurus stressed that wherever pleasure is present, there is neither pain of body or mind, nor of both at once.

Just to hammer this home, if you're not experiencing pain, what you're experiencing is pleasure. When you think like an Epicurean, there's no "neutral state," as the other philosophers want to argue.

The ultimate statement of this is from Torquatus in On Ends Book one, section 38:

> Quote
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> *"Therefore, Epicurus refused to allow that there's any middle term between pain and pleasure. What was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely anyone who is conscious of his own condition is necessarily either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain."*

That's the key to understanding Epicurean pleasure and how it relates to the absence of pain.

We don't normally think in this way because we are jaded about our valuation of life, but if we understand that true value of life we're never just "existing" in a neutral condition. Even when some part of our body or mind is in pain, we have the power to summon into our experience the pleasurable memories of the past, or pleasurable appreciation of things present or future, and we can offset pains with pleasures.

The important thing to repeat at this point is that "absence of pain" is not some ambiguous concept that invites us to emulate the hippies who "turn on, tune in, and drop out" from society.

The real implication the Epicurean attitude toward Pleasure and that the absence of pain is pleasurable, is not that we should run from pain, but that we should see that the entire spectrum of human activity, mental and physical, is included within the goal of Pleasure - so long as it is not painful. Whether you an artist or a writer or a farmer or an astronaut, whatever you find to be pleasurable is what nature is calling you to pursue - but to pursue intelligently.

Epicurus has not dismissed mountain climbing or any of things in life that require exertion to bring pleasure. He is simply showing us that Nature has given us a guide in Pleasure and Pain, and that there's no reason to look for supernatural gods or imaginary virtues or ideals. And he's telling us that it's up to us how to live our life to its best effect, because we won't be punished or rewarded after we are dead.

And this also means that there is no excuse to be afraid of life. There's no reason at all to think that you should "desire the least possible" so as to avoid all pain. If you think the phrase "absence of pain" changes the focus of life from pursuing pleasure to avoiding pain, then you're making a very major mistake - because the phrase "absence of pain" means the exact same thing as "pleasure."

If you think it through, you'll realize that the only way to be absolutely sure to avoid pain is to commit suicide, and that's exactly the opposite of what Epicurus tells us to do with our lives. Epicurus tells you that Nature is telling you to pursue pleasure, and that requires that we be alive, and that we use our intelligence in how we go about it.

Now lets talk about some objections to this perspective. Joshua?

Joshua:

The proem to the second book of Lucretius' poem is famously difficult on this point. Let me read that and talk about some of what might appear to be the implications, and see if we can work through this problem, because what he is suggesting here might seem to reinforce the point that we're trying not to not to arrive at, which is that we should remove ourselves and spend all our time in navel gazing in a cave and etc.

What he says is this:

> Quote
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> *"It is comforting when winds are whipping up the waters of the vast sea to watch from land the severe trials of another person. Not that anyone's distress is a cause of agreeable pleasure, but it is comforting to see from what troubles you yourself are exempt. It is comforting also to witness mighty clashes of warriors embattled on the plains when you have no share in the danger. But nothing is more blissful than to occupy the heights, effectively fortified by the teaching of the wise, tranquil sanctuaries from which you can look down upon others and see them wandering everywhere in their random search for the way of life, competing for intellectual eminence, disputing about rank, and striving night and day with prodigious effort to scale the summit of wealth and to secure power."*

That is Book Two, lines 1-13. And one thing we can certainly say about this passage is he is not recommending what Epicurus in the letter to Menoeceus refers to as the pleasures of the prodigal, all night drinking bouts and so forth. What he's proposing here, somewhat metaphorically, with his reference to the heights effectively fortified by the teachings of the wise, reads like withdrawal. It reads like seclusion from a world that is confused, that is manic in its pursuit of fame, power, wealth, rank, name, etc. and what Lucretius seems to be saying here is you pull back from all of that and you put yourself at a distance from all of that. And when you occupy the heights effectively fortified by the teachings of the wise, as he says, you look down from these heights, and it reframes your view of the pursuits of human life in such a way as to make them seem frivolous, silly, you know, given the scale of things, just unimportant.

And so someone reading this might think, well, you know, Lucretius wants me to go live in a Buddhist monastery and withdraw from the world. And so this passage, I think, is a place that we need to examine carefully if we want to understand what's going on here. Because I agree with you, Cassius. I don't think that Epicurus is saying that we should go to the top of Mount Etna, for example, in Greece, and look down on everybody and just stay up there forever.

Epicurus certainly didn't live his life that way. His followers did not live their lives that way. I can recommend again a video by our friend Don on the location of the garden, on the Dromos, the main road going out of pylon gate, out of the ancient city of Athens, and people talk about the garden of Epicurus as if it's in a wilderness. It's actually closer to the city walls than the Academy was.

So Epicurus did not live his life by going to a mountaintop and scorning on people for their pursuits. What he did was moved to Athens from the provinces, you know, from the outskirts. He moved to the main proving ground of Greek philosophy at that time. And while he didn't go to the gymnasium to teach because he would have been ejected, probably, and he didn't hold forth in public from the agora, he built a community of people, he corresponded with people all over the Aegean world. And that life, that life of being plugged in, of being on the main road outside of the main metropolis, dealing with people who are coming in with their own problems and their own backgrounds and so forth. This is, to me, kind of at a great distance from what Lucretius seems to be proposing here of let's all go to the mountaintop and look down on everybody, right?

Epicurus does not go in the direction that Cicero goes, right? Climbing the ladder of power, going from a relatively low rank to become consul of Rome, and so forth. Epicurus doesn't necessarily recommend that course, but he certainly is not withdrawn from the world in the way that I think people today seem to think that he is withdrawn from the world. And so the idea that we would associate well, if absence of pain is the limit of the quantity of pleasure, then there's no need to pursue anything apart from our immediate security and safety, apart from our immediate need for food and shelter and clothing and so forth. We can scale back all of our pursuits. We can scale back all of our effort in all areas and just focus on existing in this state of absence of pain.

And that's not the reading I get from the life of Epicurus. He was out there. He was. There was a big statue of him seated in a public place in the city, and the purpose was to draw people in so he could share this message. And the message, I don't think, was, let's all go to the mountaintop together and withdraw from human life. That's not how I read it.

And as a counterpoise to what we read here in the poem to book two, I would suggest looking at book six, this horrible account of the plague in Athens, and particularly Dr. Emily Austin in her book living for pleasure, has given an interpretation of the account of the plague in Athens, which is something horrible, something unimaginably horrible has happened to the city and to its people. And death is rampant. It's everywhere. It's in the streets. People are pulling their neighbor's body off the pyre so they can put their own family members body on the pyre. People have sort of come to realize that all of the structures and institutions that are built around them to contain the fear and to contain the very human response to death - when all of that crumbles, what are you left with? And what you're left with is living for today, living for pleasure in a way that doesn't make you more withdrawn. It makes you more open and more vulnerable and more available and more free and more human. And so I think contrast those two passages and read Emily Austin's book, because it's very good on this point.

Cassius:

Okay, Joshua, you've covered a lot of very important material there, so let's talk about how that fits in with the rest of what we have discussed.

As to the opening of Book Two of Lucretius, something very challenging is being said when Lucretius says that it's sweet to be up in a fortress looking at the distress of others, and we have to figure out what that means.

So what I'd like to suggest is that we think of that opening in the same way that we think about other challenging thing that Epicurus says. When he says "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain," or when he says "death is nothing to us," or when he says "all sensations are true," or when he says, "the size of the sun is as it appears to be," all of those are challenges for us to think about and understand where he is coming from.

In the case of every one of the phrases that I listed, on their face they sound ridiculous. In each case, what's necessary is to think back to what Epicurus has taught previously about his premises on how the world operates.

In the case of "death is nothing to us," Epicurus has taught that the spirit is born and dies with the body, and cannot survive without it, so we know that when we die we are no more, and that is "nothing to us." Epicurus is not saying that we shouldn't be concerned about when or how we die, because that could be very painful, or cost us a lot of time that we could be using to enjoy pleasure. You throw out any inference that contradicts what Epicurus has already said about nature, and what you're left with is the very sensible observation that *the state of being dead* is nothing to us.

In the case of "all sensations are true," Epicurus has taught that the senses have no opinions of their own, so what they give you is raw data, and it's your mind that forms opions as to what is either right or wrong. Epicurus isn't saying that the senses are telling you that what you see across the desert is an oasis, that would contradict what he said about the sense not having any opinions. So you throw out any inference that contradicts what he's already told you about the sense, and you're left with the very helpful conclusion that the senses do not lie, and that the senses do not have opinions of their own, and in *that* sense all sensations are truly telling you what it is that they perceive.

In the case of "the size of the sun is as it appears to be," Epicurus has taught that when we don't have enough information to be sure of any one conclusion, we keep open to any option that is consistent with what we do see. Epicurus isn't saying that the sun is the size of a basketball, because he can't get close enough to the sun to be sure of that. You throw away any inference that contradicts what he's already told you, and you arrive at the common sense conclusion that the sun is whatever size your senses may ultimately be able to confirm that it is. When you get telescopes - when you get rocket ships to move closer to the sun - it is your senses that will ultimately tell you how huge the sun really is.

The case of "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain" we have the same kind of pattern. Epicurus has already told you that there are only two feelings, and that the absence of sensation is death to us. Once you throw away any inference that contradicts what he's already told you, you arrive at the common sense conclusion that "absence of pain" means exactly the same kind of real-world experiences as does the word "pleasure," because there's only two feelings, so saying the absence of one means the presence of the other.

So what we see in all these examples is a similar pattern. Epicurus teaches premises about the way the world works, and expects us to use our mind to put things together. Epicurus has already told his students that any experience that is not painful is pleasurable. That means all operations of the mind or body that are not painful are pleasurable. Lucretius has already covered in the opening of Book One the pleasurable physical activities of living things. What Lucretius still needs to cover are the pleasurable *mental* activities of living things, and that's what he does in the opening of Book Two. And while he could have chosen any common activity of the mind that is not painful, he chose the same kind of mental activity that Plutarch tells us that Epicurus himself said is pleasurable, which is the great joy and delight and relief that we all experience when we realize that we have narrowly avoided some terrible danger - when we've missed being hit by the bus, or missed being hit by the falling tree that fell to our side. We get an immense feeling of joy and relief that we are still alive. Epicurus tells us that that kind of feeling is available to us all the time when we realize that we are metaphorically in a philosophical fortress, and that we are not subject to all of the pains and terrors and worthless struggles that other people who don't understand the way the world works are subjecting themselves to.

So seen in that way, the opening of book two is not a call to retreat to a fortress and stay aloof from the world. It's a mental picture of the great mental joy we can experience when we savor the confidence that comes from a proper understanding of the universe.

Lucretius extends this fortress metaphor even further in the opening of Book Six, where he makes clear that what Epicurus has done is to show us how to not only be secure, but also from what "gates" we can "sally out" and successfully encounter and defeat the obstacles that pose a problem for our happy living.

I want to give credit to you, Joshua, for finding an article just very recently that I think really helps on this point. It's another article by David Sedley, which contrasts Cyreniac against Epicurean views on happiness.

We'll get into that article more next week, but Dr. Sedley makes an important point, that Epicurus was expanding his perspective on pleasure past that of the Cyreniacs, and telling us that we can get great pleasure from looking not only from moment to moment like the Cyreniacs were doing, but looking at our lives in their widest possible perspective, as your life as a whole, just like Lucretius talks about Epicurus traveling the universe through his mind - taking a higher and wider perspective on everything that is going on and appreciating that in addition to the details.

When we do that, and we successfully banish pain to the lowest possible point in our lives, we can get great pleasure from realizing how fortunate we are to experience the pleasures that are available to us.

Again as with my airplane analogy earlier, having this kind of philosophical confidence is pleasurable in itself, but it's also essential to having the confidence to engage with the rest of the world and live your life to its fullest. When you have that kind of confidence you can navigate through life and enjoy all the pleasures available to you, free from fear of supernatural gods and free from fear of hell and the like, then you can engage in the drinking of wine and the eating of cheese and in mountain climbing and all the rest in an intelligent manner.

So that's the way I think I would link Book Two's opening to the proper interpretation of what Epicurus is saying.

We're not going to have time to go very far into the other examples that Cicero has preserved for us that prove this point, but we have both the story of Chrysippus' hand and story of the host pouring wine who is said to experience pleasure similar to the guest drinking it.

And if someone wants to object that a full quart jar does not contain as much pleasure as a full gallon jar, that's the same situation that's involved in comparing any two people with different circumstances as to virtue or any other characteristic. The best that we can do as humans is to fill our own experience, whether that experience is longer in time or shorter in time. No matter what circumstances are involved, the goal, which is the philosophic way of looking at things, is to fill with pleasure whatever experience is available to you. And that's where Epicurus as a philosopher is going to tell you to keep your eye on the target: Whatever your experience may be, work as hard as you can to fill that experience with pleasure.

To all those who are tempted to see Epicurus as an ascetic, I'd urge them to look further into those examples, and see that Epicurus does not at all abandon the ordinary bodily and mental pleasures at all.

Remember - the feeling of pleasure is not just a physical guide but a mental guide. It takes application of your mind to understand the points that Epicurus is making, but no amount of logical reasoning on its own, would ever convince you of the truth that pleasure is desirable if you did not have the faculty of pleasure within you to recognize what is pleasurable and what is not.

It's only through the faculty of Pleasure that we can come to understand that even though there is no God, even though there is no supernatural god, no life after death, no absolute virtue, there **is** something that Nature has given to us that is reliable and stable to which we can look to navigate through life.

What you have to realize is that Epicurean philosophy is a philosophy. It's not a magic pill. As Lucretius says, you can't just observe the daylight that magically transforms your thinking into something that's going to create a happy life.

You actually have to have to work - you actually have to think - you actually have to pursue "a scheme of systematic understanding;" you have to study nature. Just as Epicurus said for himself, it's the study of nature that allows you to experience pleasure to the fullest. You have to think through these things. You cannot blindly take what other people spoon feed you as the meaning of Epicurean philosophy.

Let's remember the statement of Norman DeWitt that we frequently cite. DeWitt wrote:

"The extension of the name of pleasure to the normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was, in the negative form freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified, on the ground that two different things were being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captures the fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state, did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it, nor that reason justified the application, nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing."

Joshua:

Yeah, I think those are good points, Cassius. And I think we can continue on that line by looking at what Cicero has the Epicurean Torquatus say in the first book of On Ends around section 62. He says this:

> Quote
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> *"For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise men as continually happy. He keeps his passions within bounds about death. He is indifferent. He holds true views concerning the eternal gods. Apart from all dread, he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages, he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness. Nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present. He is also very far removed from those defects of character, which I quoted a little time ago. And when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great. Pleasure and pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation."*

You know, Cicero is very hostile to Epicureanism, but he does a really good job in Book One of presenting the views in a way that is wonderfully quotable. And I think that passage from section 62 is exactly on point. It's slightly reminds me of something that Virgil wrote, I think probably in his Eclogues or maybe his Georgics, which is thought to be a reference to Lucretius, who was a huge influence on Virgil, particularly in his early work. He says:

> Quote
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> *"Happy is he who knows the causes of things, and his trod beneath his feet all fears, inexorable fate, and the din of the devouring underworld."*

And I think that's kind of on the same point. It's the same point that Lucretius makes in the opening to book two, as we've been saying, and it ties in directly with what he says in the poem to book one, with this image of Epicurus being the only one to raise his eyes to the heavens and to stare down the horrors of supernatural religion and what they've done to mankind, grovelling on the ground. And I'll reiterate the last point there, because I think it's so good and pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.

Last week I quoted from the letter to Idomeneus as preserved in a fragment in book ten of Diogenes Laertius, the biography of Epicurus about the last day of his life. And this passage into our quad is ties in so, so clearly with what Epicurus says in that letter when he says,

Quote

"I'm writing to you on a very happy day, which is also the last day of my life, because the pains of my physical condition cannot be surpassed. But I set over and above them all the pleasures of the recollection of our past friendship."

And I think that when it comes to exploring the balance between pleasure and pain and the absence of pain being the limit of pleasure, we look to these moments when pain is extreme and we see we can still set over and above that the pleasures not just of the moment but of our lives. Pleasure kind of lifts us up out of time in a way, because we can recall past pleasures and we can anticipate future pleasures, and we can enjoy the pleasures of the moment. And the pains that Epicurus is experiencing are only of the moment. Everything else is pleasure, and he calls upon that pleasure to counterbalance the effect of the pain. And as I said last week, this is evidence that even at the very end of his life, Epicurus has not stopped using pleasure as the guide in everything he does.

Cassius:

Right, Joshua. Our discussion today was focused on deepening our understanding of the meaning of Pleasure in the Epicurean context. When we come back next week, we're going to be taking up another challenging question: How can Epicurus can say that pleasure is not greater in an infinite time than it is in a limited time?

I think we're going to find that our discussion today, and how "absence of pain" constitutes the limit of pleasure, is going to help us to understand that point.

But for today, our goal has been to show that "absence of pain" really does mean the same thing as "pleasure," and this terminology does not mean that we're abandoning the ordinary stimulating pleasures of the body of the mind, but that we're adding to them the mental confidence and appreciation that comes from a proper understanding of the way the world works.

It's critical that we realize that pleasure is the same thing as absence of pain, and that we never let our minds be corrupted by the false idea that a cowardly fear of pain should be allowed to become the focus of our lives. It's not the fear of pain, it is the pursuit of pleasure, that ultimately is the driver of the Epicurean life.

So as we close today, Joshua, any final thoughts?

Joshua:

I do want to recommend again, Cassius, the article that you mentioned earlier in the episode by David Sedley that was published in 2016 called Epicurean versus Cyreniac Happiness, because that deals directly with what we'll be talking about next week regarding issues related to duration of pleasure and the effect that that has on our understanding of pleasure. David Sedley is always a treat writing on all things epicurean, and I recommend people take a look at that.

Cassius:

Yes, Joshua, that's a great article, and I'll just use that to drive home the point that the worst thing we can do is to accept the view of pleasure promoted by Plato and Ciceros and the Stoics of the world, because they would like nothing more than to see Epicurus stripped of the real meaning of his philosophy.

And the real meaning of his philosophy is that pleasure is an extremely wide concept, including all of the mental and physical activities of life that are not painful. Pleasure is not simply limited to "bodily stimulation," as Plato or Cicero or the Stoics would like people to believe.

At the same time, "absence of pain" is not a difficult concept; it is not a different type of pleasure. It is a logical deduction that the best that any human being can do - in an analogy with a vessel - is to fill their life with pleasure to the rim as closely as possible. Your vessel may not be the same size as othre people's vessels may be, but the best you can do as an individual is to come as close as possible to a completely happy life as you can by getting your life as full of pleasures as you possibly can.

But you can't get to where you need to be by falling off the proverbial turnip truck. You have to think about the philosophy. You have to study. You have to talk about it with other like minded people.

It's very easy to fall in with the crowd and to go along with ideas that obviously do not work for a majority of people. Epicurus said, "Set sail away from the conventional education." Don't give in to the crowd or the hoi polloi and follow ideas that are easy, but that lead to the same kind of problems as following the pleasures of the moment.

The best way forward is very much like Epicurus says at the end of the letter to Menoeceus:

> Quote
>
> *"Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day, by yourself and with a companion like yourself. And never shall you be disturbed, waking or asleep. But you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not likened to a mortal being.*

That's what we attempt to do at the Epicurean Friends Forum in bringing these ideas to your attention and discussing them among like-minded Friends of Epicurus. We invite you to drop by the forum and discuss this episode of Lucretius Today or anything else you like to discuss about Epicurean philosophy. Thanks for your time today - We'll be back very soon. See you then. Bye.

4. Notes

1. Major Implications:
2. *Find out more in our page dedicated to The Epicurean View of Pleasure, our Ethics Forum*