

# In Our Time: Epicureanism (BBC)

Post by "Cassius" of July 22, 2021 at 5:23 AM

It's been a while but I recall too that being a useful episode. You'll find lots of praise here on the forum for David Sedley but more mixed reviews for James Warren, because it's usually through Warren or several others of the same disposition (edit- Tim O'Keefe comes to mind too) that perspectives like this following one get emphasized:

## [Quote from Quote](#)

At the centre of his philosophy is the idea that the goal of human life is pleasure, by which he meant not luxury but the avoidance of pain

...which I find to be a misleading and distracting slant of which I do not think Epicurus would approve.

While pleasure is certainly a key issue with Epicurus, In my opinion the issue being referenced about the nature of pleasure is much too subtle to be conveyed in this way to beginning readers. The distinction raised is not "at the center" of the philosophy, and Epicurus did not even campaign against "luxury" in itself, any more than he campaigned for frugality. That's because what he indeed campaigned for is not properly defined as "absence" but instead the "presence" of the feeling of pleasure in a way that everyone can immediately grasp through feeling rather than intellectually.

In fact this issue is fascinating and in my view probably describes how the school fractured in the centuries after Epicurus, as later self-styled Epicureans deviated from Epicurus himself, who saw the issue as critical. This is well captured here by Torquatus from On Ends, who himself (through Cicero, probably) seems to have embraced the "heresy":

(This first part is likely absolutely correct):

"Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature.

What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"

*(Now here comes the heresy:)*

"Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a notion naturally implanted in our minds. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain."

To conclude, whether you agree with what I am assertion at this stage or not, it will pay to keep alert to the implications of this issue and to be aware that not everything you read about Epicurus, even by those who appear to be in Epicurus' side, can be accepted at face value.