

# Episode One Hundred Thirty Eight - Letter to Menoecus 5 - Pleasure Part One

Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 10:13 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from reneliza](#)

I see the concern here, but my thought is that "moving toward pleasure" and "moving away from pain" are not just closely related concepts, but literally exactly identical. If pleasure and pain are the only two feelings, then having less of one means more than the other. The only way to remove pain is to add pleasure. The only way to add pleasure is to remove pain. There is no neutral state in between. There is no intermediary. So life can't be motivated by pleasure without being motivated by pain as well (more of one, less of the other)

But if it's disturbing to think of being driven by a negative, then by all means say that you're motivated to move toward the pleasure found in fulfilling desire rather than ending the pain of desire. Because they're wholly equivalent, one just feels more positive because of perspective.

I think we're seeing in this discussion the difference between (1) making a philosophically logical point vs (2) making a psychologically helpful suggestion to someone struggling with basic issues of life.

Both have their place and proper circumstance, but if we take the statement that is appropriate for one situation and try to apply it to the other, we end up with something that is confusing, disconcerting, and on the face of it "wrong."

That's exactly what I think has been done with the entire issue of the "absence of pain" passages ever since the time of Cicero. Cicero was a lawyer who opposed Epicurean theory so he intentionally used this technique to score debating points and make it appear that Epicurus was logically inconsistent. Everything that Reneliza says in her post is logically correct as to the identity of "absence of one" being the same as "presence of the other." That logical observation is helpful and necessary in establishing that there is a limit to the quantity of pleasure - the limit is when all pain is gone. And if you're concerned about the issue "Does Pleasure Have A Limit?" because

you're debating pleasure with Plato and you have to establish that pleasure does have a "boundary stone," then you're doing a great job and can feel very satisfied that you have proved your point.

But that kind of philosophical debate is not the way that normal people talk, and if you try to talk with them that way you end up confusing them and looking impractical or even a fool.

So we have to find a way to articulate this problem to people who are reading Epicurus so that they are aware of it and can therefore reason themselves out of the way of the difficulty. People need to understand that many deep issues in Epicurus are not just friendly disagreements among people of good faith who are searching for the truth, but are in fact a philosophical war. Every Epicurean needs a helmet and to be ready to fight in it.

I will never forget the second paragraph of this review from Dewitt:

[attachment]

Cicero was a trial lawyer and in this allegations that Epicurus was being inconsistent he was intentionally misrepresenting Epicurean doctrine. Cicero had a brilliant mind and access to all the texts and Epicurean teachers and he could have chosen to explain Epicurus' viewpoint from a sympathetic and understandable "big picture" viewpoint. Instead, he chose to take these passages we are debating outside of their full context and hold them up as inconsistent and foolish.

If we aren't willing to take a stand ourselves and explain how these interpretations are misrepresenting the truth, then Cicero's arguments will continue to prevail, as they have prevailed for 2000 years already.

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I actually completely agree! That's why I included the second paragraph there. I appreciate getting called out though when I go too far analytical. IANAL but I do have a tendency to think like one haha.

I think if you find a struggling Epicurean trying to find the true meaning of pleasure by eliminating all desire and pain and experiencing endless tranquility that explaining that pain and pleasure are mutually exhaustive and that you reduce one by increasing the other is helpful.

It's a lot easier to eliminate pain once you understand this. I am on the Epicurean subreddit and see many people trying to avoid both pain and pleasure (out of fear that pleasure will cause long term pain) and that's simply not possible. The only way to eliminate pain as they are trying to do is to move toward pleasure.

Somewhat unrelated, but I also think it's helpful to remind people that many "simple pleasures" are without question kinetic. The most classic example to "stop and smell the roses" is a sensory pleasure and therefore kinetic under any definition!

If you're talking about someone who hasn't been tainted with the Stoic interpretation of Epicureanism, it may be less important to stress this point, especially if they don't associate the word desire with pain. It certainly isn't necessary to tell them to pursue pleasure only so they can remove all pain which is the goal of life. Pleasure is always the goal.

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

To consider for example the excitement of children waiting for Christmas morning to receive their presents to be a state in which they are in pain would I think a highly inverted way of looking at the ultimate reality.

This, however, I do disagree with. (I have to find something, right? I'm a contrarian with an unnatural desire for arguing that certainly outruns the limits fixed by nature)

The pain may be worth it in the end - the pain may even make the eventual satisfaction even sweeter - but it's still a state of pain. At least, that's how I would have described it for myself. I loved surprises but only when I didn't know they were coming. Knowing a surprise was on the way was unbearable. Perhaps this is just an individual trait though which could explain why I associate desire directly with pain.

But I also find that some desires (perhaps certain kinds of desires?) not only bring pain of wanting, but also that once they're fulfilled, the pleasure isn't nearly what I expected and I end up more likely in a state of disappointment than satisfaction.

"This is because we are genuinely persuaded that men who are able to do without luxury are the best able to enjoy luxury when it is available."

My understanding of this line is that partaking in a pleasure without desiring or expecting it makes us more likely to appreciate it and to gain more from it.

The Letter to Menoikeus also states that "the storm of the soul" can't be settled until we no longer have need to go looking for something which we lack.

I have read through the whole thread at this point, but I have to admit I'm still not sure what different kind of definition/interpretation other people are using. How is having an unmet longing NOT painful? I'd love to figure out where the misunderstanding between the two sides is occurring.