

Keen Reasoning Based on the Evidence of the Senses

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Here's another way to step through the same reasoning process:

1. **The best life (the goal) is a life completely filled with pleasures of many kinds from which all pain has been expelled.** [[Torquatus' identification of the best life in On Ends](#): "The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement." ... "If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure." [Letter to Menoecus](#): " 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."]
2. **It is impossible to expel all pain from life unless you expel fear of the gods and fear of death and fear of unmanageable pain.** [[PD12](#). "A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that, without natural science, it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed. [PD13](#). There is no profit in securing protection in relation to men, if things above, and things beneath the earth, and indeed all in the boundless universe, remain matters of suspicion. [PD04](#). Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh."]
3. **It is impossible to expel all fear of the gods and fear of death and fear of unmanageable pain through the senses alone, and for this Epicurean philosophy is needed.** [[PD18](#). "The pleasure in the flesh is not increased when once the

pain due to want is removed, but is only varied: and the limit as regards pleasure in the mind is begotten by the reasoned understanding of these very pleasures, and of the emotions akin to them, which used to cause the greatest fear to the mind." [PD20](#). "The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life." [PD03](#). "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once." [PD04](#). "Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh."]

4. **The key element of Epicurean philosophy needed to accomplish this is the understanding of how to have confidence in conclusions formed through use of the observations of the senses (which includes the ability to detect and reject deceptions and imaginary threats).** [[PD22](#), [PD23](#)] [[Torquatus](#): "Further, our mental perceptions all arise from our sensations; and if these are all to be true, as the system of Epicurus proves to us, then only will cognition and perception become possible. Now those who invalidate sensations and say that perception is altogether impossible, cannot even clear the way for this very argument of theirs when they have thrust the senses aside. Moreover, when cognition and knowledge have been invalidated, every principle concerning the conduct of life and the performance of its business becomes invalidated. So from natural science we borrow courage to withstand the fear of death, and firmness to face superstitious dread, and tranquility of mind, through the removal of ignorance concerning the mysteries of the world, and self-control, arising from the elucidation of the nature of the passions and their different classes, and as I shewed just now, our leader again has established the canon and criterion of knowledge and thus has imparted to us a method for marking off falsehood from truth." [Lucian - Alexander the Oracle-Monger](#): "And at this point, my dear Celsus, we may, if we will be candid, make some allowance for these Paphlagonians and Pontics; the poor uneducated 'fat-heads' might well be taken in when they handled the serpent—a privilege conceded to all who choose—and saw in that dim light its head with the mouth that opened and shut. It was an occasion for a Democritus, nay, for an Epicurus or a Metrodorus, perhaps, a man whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by skepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility."]
5. **Proper reasoning based on the senses requires the understanding that the senses report honestly, but that the data from the senses must be processed for consistency until it is appropriate to have confidence that the opinion we form from them is true.** Until then we "wait" before selecting any single opinion as

true. At first we look for and identify as possible any and all opinions that are consistent with available evidence. Only when we can eliminate all but one as consistent with the evidence do we hold that only one opinion is true. Sometimes we can only conclude that any of several opinions, and even more than one, may be true. This is sufficient for peace of mind so long as we have identified at least one that is consistent with nature, leaving us free of fear of a supernatural cause. [PD24] [Torquatus: " He judged that the logic of your school possesses no efficacy either for the amelioration of life or for the facilitation of debate. He laid the greatest stress on natural science. That branch of knowledge enables us to realize clearly the force of words and the natural conditions of speech and the theory of consistent and contradictory expressions; and when we have learned the constitution of the universe we are relieved of superstition, are emancipated from the dread of death, are not agitated through ignorance of phenomena, from which ignorance, more than any thing else, terrible panics often arise ; finally, our characters will also be improved when we have learned what it is that nature craves. Then again if we grasp a firm knowledge of phenomena, and uphold that canon, which almost fell from heaven into human ken, that test to which we are to bring all our judgments concerning things, we shall never succumb to any man's eloquence and abandon our opinions."]

6. **The first and most fundamental step in the Epicurean process of chain reasoning is the observation that nothing is ever created from nothing at the will of gods or through any other means.** From this observation, and from the related observation that nothing is ever destroyed to nothing, we conclude that at the heart of existence are eternal unchanging atoms moving through void, which allows us a fully sufficient explanation of the natural functioning of the universe that we observe around us, without need of supernatural or imaginary forces for which there is no evidence. [[Lucretius Book 1 and 2](#), [Letter to Herodotus](#)] [Lucretius Book 1: "[146] These terrors of the mind, this darkness then, not the Sun's beams, nor the bright rays of day, can ever dispel, but Nature's light and reason, whose first of principles shall be my guide: **Nothing was by the Gods of nothing made.** For hence it is that fear disturbs the mind, that strange events in Earth and Heaven are seen, whose causes cannot appear by reason's eye, and then we say they were from Powers Divine. But when we rest convinced that nothing can arise from nothing, then the way is clear to our pursuit; we distinctly see whence every thing comes into being, and how things are formed, without the help and trouble of the Gods. If things proceed from nothing, every thing might spring from any thing, and want no seed; Men from the sea might first arise, and fish and birds break from the Earth, and herds and tender flocks drop from the sky, and every kind of beast, fixed to no certain place, might find a being in deserts or in cultivated fields.... Again, if things could spring from nought, what need of time for bodies to fulfill their growth by accession of new matter? An infant then might instantly become a youth, and trees start up in full perfection from the Earth. But 'tis not so, 'tis plain; for things, we know, grow by degrees from certain seeds, and still, as they grow, keep their kind; and thus you find each being rise into bulk, and thrives from seed and matter proper to itself."]
7. **This chain reasoning process continues from that point to allow us to conclude with confidence a number of crucial opinions, among the most important of**

which are: that the universe is eternal in time, that the universe is infinite in space, that nothing has an eternal unchanging existence except matter and void, that bodies are constantly changing and in the normal course of events do not remain together forever (thus the human soul does not survive death), and that the universe has no supernatural forces ruling over it. [[Lucretius Book 1 and 2, Letter to Herodotus](#):

"Having made these points clear, we must now consider things imperceptible to the senses. First of all, that nothing is created out of that which does not exist: for if it were, everything would be created out of everything with no need of seeds. [39] And again, if that which disappears were destroyed into that which did not exist, all things would have perished, since that into which they were dissolved would not exist. Furthermore, the universe always was such as it is now, and always will be the same. For there is nothing into which it changes: for outside the universe there is nothing which could come into it and bring about the change. Moreover, the universe is bodies and space: for that bodies exist, sense itself witnesses in the experience of all men, and in accordance with the evidence of sense we must of necessity judge of the imperceptible by reasoning, as I have already said. [40] And if there were not that which we term void and place and intangible existence, bodies would have nowhere to exist and nothing through which to move, as they are seen to move. And besides these two, nothing can even be thought of either by conception or on the analogy of things conceivable such as could be grasped as whole existences and not spoken of as the accidents or properties of such existences."]

8. **These conclusions allow us to have confidence that there are no eternal forms or eternal essences on which any kind of absolute rules of human conduct (absolute notions of "virtue") can have any basis, and that the ultimate and only true basis of human conduct are the faculties given us by nature - the feelings of pleasure and pain.** [[Torquatus Narrative from On Ends, including as to virtue](#):

"Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be delivered from the grossest error. Your school dilates on the transcendent beauty of the virtues; but were they not productive of pleasure, who would deem them either praiseworthy or desirable? We esteem the art of medicine not for its interest as a science, but for its conduciveness to health; the art of navigation is commended for its practical and not its scientific value, because it conveys the rules for sailing a ship with success. So also Wisdom, which must be considered as the art of living, if it effected no result would not be desired; but as it is, it is desired, because it is the artificer that procures and produces pleasure." *And as to pleasure and pain*: "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?"]

9. **Just as the senses alone are incapable of eliminating all fear of gods and death and unmanageable pain without proper (Epicurean) philosophy, it is necessary for us to employ proper Epicurean philosophy to determine when to choose**

pain or to avoid choosing a particular pleasure for the sake of achieving greater pleasure through that prudent selection. [[Letter to Menoeceus](#): 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. [130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.' [Torquatus](#): "But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of reprobating pleasure and extolling pain arose. To do so, I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure? On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains."]

10. **All of this is why we need Epicurean philosophy and why - because he was the first to identify this system through which we can free ourselves from false religions and false fears - Epicurus deserves to be seen as one of the greatest reformers and benefactors in human history.** [[Torquatus narrative in On Ends](#), including: "If then the doctrine I have set forth is clearer and more luminous than daylight itself; if it is derived entirely from Nature's source; if my whole discourse relies throughout for confirmation on the unbiased and unimpeachable evidence of the senses; if lisping infants, nay even dumb animals, prompted by Nature's teaching, almost find voice to proclaim that there is no welfare but pleasure, no hardship but pain—and their judgment

in these matters is neither sophisticated nor biased—ought we not to feel the greatest gratitude to him who caught this utterance of Nature's voice, and grasped its import so firmly and so fully that he has guided all sane-minded men into the paths of peace and happiness, calmness and repose?" [Lucretius Book 1](#): "When human life, all too conspicuous, lay foully groveling on earth, weighed down by grim religion looming from the skies, horribly threatening mortal men, a man, a Greek, first raised his mortal eyes bravely against this menace. No report of gods, no lightning-flash, no thunder-peal made this man cower, but drove him all the more with passionate manliness of mind and will to be the first to spring the tight-barred gates of Nature's hold asunder. So his force, his vital force of mind, a conqueror beyond the flaming ramparts of the world, explored the vast immensities of space with wit and wisdom, and came back to us triumphant, bringing news of what can be and what cannot, limits and boundaries, the borderline, the benchmark, set forever. Religion, so, is trampled underfoot, and by his victory we reach the stars."]

Note: As a reminder to myself if I update this I will also update the easier-to-find "article" version [here](#).