

Ongoing Discussion of Jack Gedney's "Untroubled" Substack Blog

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2026 at 1:45 PM

Good luck Don. Always good to try when there is any hope of success. Here is a summary of the major arguments that appear scattered in many places on this site:

"Why It Is Incorrect to Say Epicurean Philosophy Is Primarily About 'Absence of Pain'"

Quote

"For this reason 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." -- Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus

The Claim and Why It Matters

The claim that Epicurean philosophy is "primarily about the absence of pain" — that the Epicurean goal is a passive, featureless neutral state free from disturbance — is one of the most consequential misreadings in the history of philosophy. It transforms a vigorous, life-affirming system into something that looks, in practice, indistinguishable from the Stoic, Buddhist, or ascetic counsels that Epicurus directly opposed.

The arguments against this reading are numerous, mutually reinforcing, and grounded in the primary texts. They are collected here in condensed form.

Argument 1: There Are Only Two Feelings — Absence of One Is Presence of the Other

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5086-ongoing-discussion-of-jack-gedney-s-untroubled-substack-blog/?postID=39934#post39934>

This is the most fundamental argument, and it dissolves the apparent contrast between "pleasure" and "absence of pain" entirely.

- Epicurus taught that Nature has given every living creature exactly **two internal feelings**: pleasure and pain.
- These two are **exhaustive and mutually exclusive** — there is no third state between them.
- **If pain is absent, pleasure is present** — not by convention or definition, but because there are only two options and one of them is gone.
- "Absence of pain" and "presence of pleasure" are therefore **two ways of describing the same condition**, not two different things.

Quote

"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." -- Diogenes Laertius, Book X, 34

Quote

"Surely anyone who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain." -- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* 1.38

Quote

"I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too." -- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* 2.16

- **The practical consequence:** Saying the Epicurean goal is "absence of pain" rather than "pleasure" is like saying the goal is "not being in darkness" rather than "being in light." The two phrases pick out the same state from opposite directions. The choice to emphasize the negative formulation is a rhetorical one, not a philosophical one — and it is a rhetorical choice that consistently misleads general audiences toward passivity and minimalism.

Argument 2: The Letter to Menoecus Cannot Be Read Through a Single Sentence Torn From Context

The passage most often cited as evidence for the "absence of pain" reading is this one:

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5086-ongoing-discussion-of-jack-gedney-s-untroubled-substack-blog/?postID=39934#post39934>

"When we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality... but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind." -- Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus

This sentence is real — but reading it in isolation while ignoring everything around it is a fundamental error of method. The *Letter to Menoeceus* as a whole says the opposite of what the "absence of pain" reading requires:

- **The letter opens** by stating that philosophy leads to **happiness** — not tranquility, not absence of pain, but happiness.
- **The letter explicitly declares** that "pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life" and "the first good innate in us."
- **The contested passage** is not Epicurus saying "I don't mean pleasure; I mean absence of pain." It is Epicurus clarifying that "pleasure" in his usage is broader than physical stimulation of the body — it **includes** freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance as genuine pleasures, not as replacements for pleasure.
- **The letter closes** with the vision of the wise man living "like a god among men" — a life of **full positive pleasure**, not minimal disturbance.

Reading one sentence against the grain of the entire letter is precisely the kind of selective citation that produces the misreading. The rule applies here as everywhere: a single passage, read in isolation, cannot overturn the consistent testimony of the whole.

Argument 3: Principal Doctrine 3 Is a Targeted Response to a Specific Philosophical Opponent — Not a Summary of Epicurean Ethics

Principal Doctrine 3 states:

Quote

"The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in 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."

This doctrine has been taken as definitive proof that Epicurus reduced the goal of life to the mere absence of pain. That reading mistakes the context entirely.

- **PD3 is the third in a deliberate sequence of responses** to the three most powerful ancient arguments used to attack pleasure as the goal of life:
 - **PD1** answers the argument from divine punishment: a truly blessed being has no interest in rewarding or punishing humans.
 - **PD2** answers the argument from fear of death: death is the end of all sensation, so neither good nor evil follows it.
 - **PD3 and PD4** answer the argument from Plato's *Philebus*: that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it has no limit and therefore can never be complete.
- **Plato's challenge** was: pleasure can always be increased; it is never finished; a thing that cannot be completed cannot be the highest good.
- **Epicurus's answer** (PD3): pleasure *does* have a limit — the limit is reached when all pain is removed, because at that point there is no more pain to displace. The cup is full. What Plato said could never be complete is in fact complete.
- **What PD3 is *not* doing**: It is not saying that the content of a good life is merely the absence of pain. It is establishing that the *measure of fullness* — the philosophical limit that answers Plato — is the removal of pain. The content of the full life remains what Epicurus stated throughout all his writings: the pleasures of taste, hearing, sight, friendship, philosophy, memory, and anticipation.
- **The analogy**: PD3 tells us the cup is full when it reaches the brim. It says nothing about what fills the cup. Those who read PD3 as defining the Epicurean goal have confused the measurement of fullness with the content being measured.

Argument 4: Epicurus Stated Explicitly What He Could Not Conceive the Good Without

There is no ambiguity about this:

Quote

"I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form." -- Epicurus, in Diogenes Laertius, Book X

Quote

"For my part I find no meaning which I can attach to what is termed good, if I take away from it the pleasures obtained by taste, if I take away the pleasures which come from listening to music, if I take away too the charm derived by the eyes from the sight of figures in movement, or other pleasures by any of the senses in the whole man." -- Epicurus, as quoted by Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*

- These are not the words of a man who thought the good life consisted in a passive neutral state free from disturbance.
 - These are the words of a man for whom the positive content of pleasure — vivid, sensory, active, varied — is inseparable from what "good" even means.
 - A philosophy whose goal is "primarily absence of pain" would not generate statements like this. A philosophy whose goal is genuine, active, positive pleasure would — and does.
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Argument 5: The Ancient Witnesses Are Unanimous That the Goal Is Active, Vivid Pleasure

Both friendly and hostile ancient sources understood Epicurus to be teaching active pleasure, not passive absence of disturbance:

- **Torquatus** (Cicero's Epicurean spokesman): *"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?"*
- **Diogenes of Oinoanda** (carved in stone for all passersby): *"I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the **fullness of pleasure**."*
- **Cicero** (a hostile critic, which makes his testimony all the more telling): *"[The Epicureans said] that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures" — the Latin is unambiguous: *plena et conferta voluptatibus*, a life **full and crammed** with pleasures.*
- **Torquatus** again: *"The wise man is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains."*

A philosophy primarily about "absence of pain" would not be described by its ancient advocates and critics alike as a philosophy of numerous, vivid, crammed-full pleasures.

Argument 6: The Friendship Argument — Why "Minimize Pain" Cannot Be the Prime Directive

This argument is practical and penetrating. Frances Wright's *A Few Days In Athens* captures it clearly:

- Deep friendship is one of the greatest pleasures Epicurus identified.
- Deep friendship inevitably ends in grief for one of the parties — grief that is among the sharpest pains available to human experience.

- A person whose goal was *primarily to minimize pain* would rationally avoid deep friendship, moderate every attachment, guard against every commitment that might later hurt.
- The Epicurean does the opposite — pursues friendship **gladly, deliberately, and without reservation** — because the pleasures of shared life, mutual support, and being truly known vastly outweigh the cost of eventual grief.
- The pain of grief is accepted willingly as the price of the pleasure that made it possible.

The conclusion: If "absence of pain" were the prime directive, Epicurus would counsel against deep friendship. He counseled the opposite — calling friendship "the greatest of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life." The Epicurean goal must be stated as the **maximum of pleasure**, not the minimum of pain. These are not the same thing, and the difference shapes every practical choice.

Argument 7: "The Goal of Life Is Absence of Pain" as a Standalone Phrase Is Liable to Systematic Misinterpretation

Even where the phrase is technically defensible (because of the two-feelings doctrine), it consistently misleads:

- Most people who encounter "the goal is absence of pain" without full context will interpret it as recommending a **passive, neutral, featureless state** — essentially philosophical nothingness.
 - The phrase echoes **Buddhist and Stoic counsels** of detachment and desire-suppression, and listeners draw exactly that connection — the opposite of the Epicurean position.
 - The Epicurean texts warn explicitly against this misuse. The correct approach is to **lead with pleasure as the positive goal** and introduce the equivalence with "absence of pain" as secondary clarification, not as the primary summary.
 - Presenting the Epicurean goal as "absence of pain" to a general audience without full explanation produces a picture of Epicurus as an ascetic minimalist — the precise opposite of what Torquatus described and what Diogenes of Oinoanda carved into stone.
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Argument 8: The "Limit" Is Not the Goal — The Full Cup Model

The appropriate analogy - as used in the opening of Lucretius Book Six - is that of a "full cup" or "full vessel" which makes the relevant distinction precisely:

- The **limit of pleasure** (where pain is fully removed) is the measure of whether the cup is full — it is the *criterion of completeness*.
- The **content of pleasure** (the varied, vivid, active pleasures that fill the cup) is what the good life actually consists of.
- Confusing the measure of fullness with the content is like saying a feast is "primarily about not being hungry." Not being hungry is what a completed feast achieves — but the feast consists of food, company, and enjoyment, not of the absence of hunger.
- The full cup cannot be made fuller — but it is **full**, not empty.

Quote

"[T]he Epicureans said that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures." -- Cicero, *In Defense of Publius Sestius* 10.23

A crammed-full cup is not a description of an "absence of pain" philosophy. It is the description of a philosophy of positive, active, abundant pleasure — guided by reason to ensure the cup is sound and the pleasures genuine.

Argument 9: The Three Distorting Traditions That Produced This Reading

The "absence of pain" reading did not arise from careful study of the full panoply of available texts. It arose from three cultural filters that have operated on Epicurus for centuries, all pushing in the same direction:

- **The Stoic filter:** Stoics found it useful to read Epicurus as a failed Stoic — someone whose *ataraxia* was essentially Stoic *apatheia* in different language. Domesticating Epicurus as a philosopher of tranquility served the Stoic agenda.
- **The religious filter:** For traditions that regard pleasure as morally suspect, reading Epicurus as a philosopher of inner peace (rather than pleasure) makes him theologically more comfortable. The cost is misreading him.
- **The Humanist filter:** Modern Humanism's emphasis on rational self-restraint and the subordination of appetite to principle makes the "tranquility" reading of Epicurus more acceptable than his actual teaching. Again, comfort is purchased at the price of accuracy.

All three filters consistently distort the reading of Epicurus in the same direction: away from pleasure (which sounds too bodily, too individual) and toward tranquility (which sounds

elevated and dignified). All three produce an Epicurus who is no longer recognizably Epicurean.

Argument 10: The Historical Record of Epicurean Lives Contradicts the Ascetic Picture Entirely

If Epicurean philosophy were primarily about the absence of pain — about minimizing desire, withdrawing from engagement, and seeking a passive featureless calm — we would expect to find this reflected in the lives of the Epicurean leaders themselves. We find the opposite at every turn.

Epicurus's own life and property:

- At his death, Epicurus held extensive property — the Garden, his house inside the walls of Athens, and other holdings — and bequeathed them formally by will to continue the school's work.
- The Garden was not a remote rural hermitage. It stood on the **Dromos**, the most traveled ceremonial thoroughfare in Athens — the main road from the Dipylon Gate to Plato's Academy, thirty-nine meters wide in places, used for the great Panathenaic procession and by travelers, merchants, diplomats, and students daily. Epicurus was not hiding. He was on the main road.
- At the gate of the Garden, Epicurus posted an explicit public welcome: "*Hospes hic bene manebis, hic summum bonum voluptas est*" — "**O Guest, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.**" He advertised the philosophy on one of the busiest roads in the ancient world and invited every passerby in.
- Epicurus maintained correspondence with friends and followers across the entire Greek world — not a small isolated community but an extensive network.
- He hosted regular meals and dinners, enjoyed wine, engaged in philosophical conversation as a positive pleasure, and is documented as owning slaves and managing the substantial finances of a large and active school.
- Not a single ancient source describes Epicurus as ascetic, minimalistic, or withdrawn from the city and its life. The description of a recluse in a sealed private retreat is, as the evidence establishes, a fiction.

No Epicurean leader of the ancient world is famed for asceticism:

- Metrodorus, Hermarchus, Colotes, and the other early Epicurean leaders were active, engaged participants in philosophical debate — writing polemical works, corresponding with opponents, building institutions.
- **Philodemus** (1st century BC) lived and worked in the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum — one of the grandest private estates in the Roman world — as the philosophical associate of **Lucius Calpurnius Piso**, the father-in-law of Julius Caesar and a man of

enormous wealth and political influence. A philosopher whose goal was "absence of pain" in the minimalist sense would not be living in a villa of extraordinary luxury surrounded by one of the largest private libraries of antiquity. Philodemus also wrote prolifically — dozens of surviving works — precisely to bring Epicurean philosophy to the educated Roman public.

- **Diogenes of Oinoanda** (2nd century AD) spent his personal fortune commissioning a **massive stone inscription** — covering the entire wall of a public stoa in his city — so that every passerby could read the Epicurean philosophy for free. He states his reason explicitly: he wanted to spread the benefits of philosophy as widely as possible before his death. This is the action of a man who understood his goal as the active promotion of the fullest possible pleasurable life for others — not of a man who thought the goal was passive withdrawal.
- **Torquatus** and **Cassius Longinus**, the most prominent Roman Epicureans of the late Republic, were men of the first political and military rank. Cassius organized the conspiracy against Caesar from Epicurean philosophical conviction. Neither resembles an ascetic minimalist by any stretch.

Epicurean leaders actively recruited outsiders:

- Epicurus himself wrote extensively and distributed his works to friends and strangers across the Greek world — the explicit purpose being to share the philosophy and bring others to live well.
- Philodemus's entire career was oriented toward making Epicurean philosophy accessible to Roman intellectual and political society — the opposite of sectarian withdrawal.
- Diogenes of Oinoanda carved philosophy into stone for *all who pass by* — Greeks and non-Greeks alike, as he states explicitly. His inscription was a form of philosophical outreach without parallel in the ancient world.
- The Epicurean school's warm communal culture — the birthday celebrations of Epicurus, the letters of philosophical friendship, the welcoming of women and slaves as full participants — was explicitly designed to draw people in, not to wall them out.

Epicurean sympathies in the courts of the powerful:

- **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, the Seleucid king whose court had Epicurean sympathies, established a Gymnasium in Jerusalem — the institutional center of Hellenistic philosophical culture — not a monastery.
- **Empress Pompeia Plotina**, wife of Trajan and one of the most powerful women in Rome, was a documented and devoted Epicurean. Her personal letter to Hadrian begins: "*How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord.*" She intervened successfully to change Roman law governing the Epicurean school's succession in Athens. Upon her death, Hadrian deified her and built temples in her honor. The Epicurean school's most prominent imperial patron was a woman at the center of Roman power — not a recluse.

The friendship argument as lived practice:

- Friendship — demanding, deep, reciprocal, grief-risking friendship — was not a theoretical value for these leaders. It was the organizing principle of how they lived. Epicurus's deathbed letter to Idomeneus celebrates friendship. Philodemus's philosophical work on frank speech (*parrhesia*) is organized entirely around the practices of genuine friendship within philosophical community. Diogenes of Oinoanda's inscription is itself an act of friendship extended to strangers.
- Friendship of this kind is neither minimalistic nor ascetic. It requires investment — of time, attention, emotional vulnerability, practical resources — and it generates the kinds of experiences that make "absence of pain" a grossly inadequate description of what the Epicureans were living.

The verdict of the historical record: Not one of the known Epicurean leaders — Epicurus, Metrodorus, Hermarchus, Philodemus, Diogenes of Oinoanda, Torquatus, Cassius Longinus, Pompeia Plotina — lived a life that could honestly be described as organized around minimizing stimulation or withdrawing from engagement. Every one of them was active, connected, productive, and committed to bringing others into the philosophy. The ascetic minimalist picture is a later distortion, not a historical reality.

Summary: What the Texts Actually Say

Claim	What the Texts Say
The goal is "absence of pain"	<i>"Pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life."</i> — Letter to Menoecus
The goal is tranquility/ataraxia	<i>"Pleasure is the end of the best mode of life."</i> — Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 32
PD3 defines the Epicurean goal	PD3 answers Plato's "no limits" argument; it does not summarize Epicurean ethics
The wise man seeks minimal stimulation	<i>"Numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind."</i> — Torquatus
"Absence of pain" and "pleasure" are different things	<i>"Surely anyone conscious of his condition must be either in pleasure or in pain."</i> — Torquatus
Epicurus couldn't conceive the good without active pleasure	<i>"I know not how to conceive the good apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound."</i> — Epicurus

Conclusion

Saying that Epicurean philosophy is "primarily about the absence of pain" is wrong in multiple independent ways simultaneously:

1. It violates the two-feelings doctrine — absence of pain simply *is* pleasure.
2. It reads a single clause of the *Letter to Menoeceus* against the plain meaning of the whole letter.
3. It treats PD3 as a summary of Epicurean ethics when it is a targeted response to a specific philosophical opponent.
4. It contradicts Epicurus's own explicit statements about what he could not conceive the good without.
5. It is flatly contradicted by every ancient witness, friendly and hostile alike.
6. It produces practical counsel (minimize attachments, avoid risk of grief) that Epicurus explicitly rejected.
7. It misleads general audiences by suggesting something like Buddhist or Stoic detachment — the precise opposite of what Epicurus taught.

The Epicurean goal is **a life full of positive pleasure** — crammed full, as the ancient testimony puts it — pursued wisely so that the pleasures are real, lasting, and uncontaminated by the greater pains that foolish pursuit would bring. Absence of pain describes the same state from the negative side, because where pain ends, pleasure begins — but this logical equivalence should never be mistaken for an endorsement of the *empty* cup over the *full* one.

The goal is fullness. Not emptiness.