

# SOE13: The goal of religion

Post by "Hiram" of December 30, 2019 at 10:56 AM

Concerning [Cassius](#) ' feedback:

Quote

**SOE13: The goal of religion is the experience of pure, effortless pleasure.**

Objection to SOE13: This statement seems to me to have no foundation in the Epicurean texts whatsoever. Are you saying "should be" rather than "is"? In that case the goal of a "proper" religion would be to promote pleasure and avoid pain, just as the purpose of every tool would ultimately be the same. But unless I am mistaken you are certainly not meaning to imply that this "is" the goal of every current world religion.

The goal to religion (pleasure) is assigned by Epicurus as part of his moral reform.

The source is from Philodemus' [scroll On Piety](#); here are some of the direct quotes:

Quote

But those who believe our oracles about the Gods will first wish to **imitate their blessedness**, insofar as mortals can, so that, since it was seen to come from doing no harm to anyone, **they will endeavor most of all to make themselves harmless to everyone** as far as it is within their power, and second, **to make themselves noble** ...

**The just person has noble expectations concerning the Gods, and at the same time exceedingly enjoys pleasures that are unalloyed and effortless.**

When describing the truly pious person (according to the Epicureans, as opposed to the vulgarly-pious), Philodemus describes this person as enjoying pleasures that are UNALLOYED and EFFORTLESS.

I interpret unalloyed / pure to mean that, **when subjected to hedonic calculus, they produce no disadvantages.**

I interpret effortless to mean just what it says. The pleasure here is easy, perhaps tied to singing a religious song or uttering a praise or to contemplation.

Here are other quotes which further clarify what Epicurean piety feels like:

Quote

(To others,) piety appears to include not harming both other people and especially one's benefactors and homeland. To be sure, they honor something rather kindly and propitious, whereas we all regard our views as the **true cause of our tranquility**.

*... for every wise man holds pure and holy beliefs about the Divine. - Epicurus*

So here we see that "making oneself harmless to everyone", making oneself noble, and having views that are "a true cause of our tranquility" are also properties of true piety, according to the Epicurean sources.

Many of the passages in the scroll were notes taken during class (under Zeno of Sidon), and many were quotes from Metrodorus and Epicurus, to whose authority Philodemus appealed frequently.

My purpose in having a "purpose of religion" Tenet is to help us have concrete Epicurean moral guidance to offer to religious students of Epicurus, and also to dig up the few sources that we have regarding this for study.

Here is On Piety:

<https://www.amazon.com/Philodemus-Pie...n/dp/0198150083>

I suppose *I should also address this here:*

Quote

**SOE12: There are three acceptable interpretations of the Epicurean gods: the realist interpretation, the idealist interpretation, and the atheist interpretation.**

Objection to SOE12: What does "acceptable" mean? Acceptable so as to be a member of Society of Epicurus? Acceptable so as to not be considered an enemy of Epicurus? These categories listed here have no generally accepted definitions so would require explanation. I cannot imagine that any interpretation that implies that Epicurus was intentionally being less than honest with his statements on gods would be acceptable to a "Society of Epicurus." And Epicurus' statements were very specific -- he used the term "gods" to refer to naturally-occurring, non-supernatural, non-omnipotent beings which he held do exist somewhere in the universe, but not here on Earth, and having no concerns about us whatsoever, but about which we are able to either perceive or conceive aspects of pleasurable living that can serve as worthwhile things for us to

contemplate and emulate. Obviously much has been lost and is unclear but no interpretation that does not accept that Epicurus meant what he said should be acceptable (in my opinion) to a society modeling itself after Epicurus.

Yes, The accusation that Epicurus didn't say what he meant is dangerous. I think he was a realist, and was using the methodology we see in "against empty words" to redefine the word "gods" according to nature.

The idealist and atheist interpretations are by those who came before him. So this is to say: Epicurus himself was a realist. Later Epicureans may agree with his views, or believe that the gods whose bodies are made out of particles:

- a. do not exist, but their contemplation has utility (the idealist interpretation)
- b. do not exist, and their contemplation is pointless or unnecessary (the atheist interpretation)

Here is Ilkka's easy-to-read essay on this:

<http://menoceus.blogspot.com/2014/08/epicurean-gods.html>

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## **Post by “Elayne” of December 30, 2019 at 12:32 PM**

Hiram, here is an example where I think Philodemus shows some idealism. What on earth is "noble", unless it is tied to ability to get pleasure? His assertion that not harming others, generically, is something we should do because the gods did it makes zero sense. The gods as described were not at risk of harm from humans, so harming us would not cause them pleasure. If we were to threaten their pleasure, they would be wise to stop us even if the only way was to harm us.

Notice that Epicurus spoke of the "wise man" -- the man who has learned to get pleasure. In reality, this would require taking different actions in different conditions and subordinating nothing to pleasure. The wise person believes pure pleasure is experienced somewhere in the universe by material beings, and that such beings would not engage in human affairs because of their specific situation, and this reduces anxiety and provides hope for our own success at pleasure.

This bit of Philodemus sounds Christian in its level of idealizing non-harming. If Epicurus had written like that, I wouldn't be an Epicurean.

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## Post by “Elayne” of December 30, 2019 at 12:37 PM

Any action at all, including thinking and feeling, requires the consumption of ATP, energy, and takes some level of effort, which can be pleasurable or not. You give the example of singing as effortless-- as a soprano who sings in public performances, I promise there's effort even in singing alone in the shower. It takes muscle. But I enjoy it immensely.

Purely effortless pleasure is impossible. Painless pleasure, on the other hand, is possible, and I know because I've had it.

I think Epicurus would argue with Philodemus, and if not, I'll argue against them both.

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2019 at 1:23 PM

I agree with Elayne's comments and there is probably a lot more here to be unpacked.

I would first start however with the point that the Philodemus material is by no means as well established as the other core material including Lucretius. I presume you are referring to Dirk Obbink (sp?) material and I would simply not be willing to take material like that as confidently established without looking at exact pages and reference material to see what he had to go by in reconstructing his version. How much of the word being translated as "effortless" really survives, and how much is reconstructed? And what does survive, has Dirk himself seen the original, or is this itself reconstruction from 200+ year old material that all we have is penciled versions with who knows what level of accuracy?

I suspect that reconciliation could be done to bring "effortless" into consistency with the rest of the philosophy, but I just don't think it is a very good idea to place so much emphasis on such slender material.

And I also think that summarizing the point being made really comes across in " **The goal of religion is the experience of pure, effortless pleasure.**"

The words "religion" and "pure" and "effortless" would all require explanation to make sense, and I would not think much is being accomplished with a summary that is so unclear absent explanation.

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**Post by “Elayne” of December 30, 2019 at 1:43 PM**

Oscar, I don't generically try to minimize harm. I have a strong degree of empathy, such that I cover my eyes in violent movie scenes because I find it painful. I have a pain in my corresponding body part when I witness another person being injured.

But it's completely contextual. If someone tried to hurt one of my kids, and my only route of defense was to harm the aggressor, I'd do that in a flash. I wouldn't even stop to think. The total result of my action would be the pleasure of saving my child from harm, and the pleasure isn't based on reason but on direct, spontaneous interaction with reality.

It's unlikely I would use premeditated pain more than essential for defense, but that's only bc of how I am "wired".

If someone got pleasure from hurting others, which happens, it's natural for the targets of harm to join forces against the aggressor to restrain them in some way. In that case, if the aggressive person could think through the results of action, they could decide if it was wiser for their pleasure to aggress or to refrain and get pleasure another way. It might not always come out in favor of nonaggression. This, I think, is why Epicurus said laws are for the protection of the wise.

The Christian version is in loving everyone, even your enemies, turning the other cheek, forgiving indefinitely, and leaving judgment/ consequences to a supernatural idea. Of course it doesn't get carried out much in practice, and thank goodness for that, because biologically speaking we will likely always have intra-species predators, and if we want to enjoy life, it's wise to treat them differently.

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**Post by “Elayne” of December 30, 2019 at 1:56 PM**

I will add that my personal experience of the harm done by a non-harming ideal and trying to love everyone just based on their being a human is what helps me spot this. I wasn't raised religious but still unwittingly absorbed this bit of idealism from the culture. Humanism is rife with it. By refraining from causing harm and trying to love unconditionally, I stayed in a very painful life circumstance for a long, long time. If I had been advised by friends that I might need

to cause harm, including emotional or financial, to get out, and that unconditional love is ridiculous, it would have been very helpful to my happiness!

I am not sure if others here will recognize how closely such generic non-harming advice ties into advice for people to stay in abusive relationships. One tool used by aggressors is to say things like "if you leave me, I will die", etc. The person doesn't want to cause harm because they've absorbed that it's wrong, so they stay on.

On a non-human level, without our immune systems constantly deciding which microbial invaders to kill and which to get along with, we wouldn't be able to exist as a species. Our bodies are constantly harming or getting along, depending on specifics.

Sometimes the wise thing is to cause harm.

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### **Post by “Hiram” of December 30, 2019 at 4:27 PM**

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

Hiram, here is an example where I think Philodemus shows some idealism. What on earth is "noble" ...

This is another word that was used by the founders (VS 78). The word was used by Polystratus in "On irrational contempt". He was the third Scholarch after Hermarchus died, and would have studied under Epicurus from a very early age, so he is an important source who was in the immediacy of the first Garden.

I believe the word was "kalon", sometimes compared to the opposite word which was translated as "vile". Polystratus argued that qualities such as these ones REALLY existed and were observable / similarly ugly and beautiful, pleasure and pain, etc. His argument was that these were "relational properties of nature".

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### **Post by “Hiram” of December 30, 2019 at 4:45 PM**

We **could** argue with the sources--Philodemus, Polystratus, even Epicurus--, but I would prefer if people don't do it until they've made a good will attempt to get what was being said. I'm sure Philodemus understood what was wrong with idealism, and I'm sure he wasn't trying to teach idealism, because he was immersed in a society that was plagued by Platonism and understood the issues.

There's another quote from On Piety where Philodemus talks about how piety helps us to cultivate pleasant "psycho-somatic dispositions". I think this passage is key and should be evaluated next to all the other passages, because it implies that the exercises in piety were meant to have effects on the health of the body AND the mind (psycho - somatic).

So considering how scarce our sources are, rather than dismiss this discourse, it should fall to us to try to reconstruct these ideas, and here is a MATERIALIST theory of piety, one which constitutes a unique contribution that EP makes to ethics, and also one that can be verified against research on the healing effects of chanting and other pious practices. Here is also a chance to show how the Canon is used. We appeal to evidence and check the doctrine against studies available. In my book I cited studies by Marian Diamond which documented and quantified the health benefits of chanting, including lowering blood pressure and heart rate. THIS type of thing vindicates the assertion that piety is meant to have a psycho-somatic effect. And again, this is therefore NOT idealism, it's a way of looking at religious practices from a purely materialist perspective.

Similarly with "imitating their blessedness" and "making oneself harmless", etc. Piety is meant to be an ethical exercise that helps to cultivate a certain kind of disposition (diathesis, a word we find in Philodemus and also in Diogenes of Oenoanda) and character, just like we exercise our body.

Also, what's being said here is not "do not harm, ever". That is NOT the point. What's being said here is "these practices will make you of a certain, harmless disposition". The tacit idea is that this is a disposition that is advantageous or pleasant or desirable, particularly among friends or people who engage in pious acts together. Just like when we associate with certain kinds of people who help us develop a good character, similarly with these practices.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2019 at 6:29 PM**

OK I am back after a delay in being able to respond. I want to repeat that I do not intend to dismiss anything in particular that can be well documented from the texts, but the first test in my mind of texts that are not well documented is "Is the suggested translation consistent with what we know from the reliable texts and from our understanding of the Epicurean worldview /

nature of the universe?"

Here I would scrutinize both "noble" and "piety." We know that the only ultimate standard is pleasure and pain, and that concepts that we today associate with "nobility" are run through with Stoicism. Even if we are certain that the original text used a word like "kalon" (which is not a given unless we have a very good chain of custody of the original texts, which I don't think we have here) then we have to rely on what the translators think the word "kalon" meant to the Epicureans, and we know that they used words with their own twists on definitions.

I think that especially goes for "piety." I know what that word implies in 2019 America, but I don't know whether our word corresponds to what was in the texts or the minds of the ancient Epicureans. "Piety" has lots of meanings today and I don't think we can suppose anything about what it meant to the Epicureans that would be inconsistent with what we understand about their core views of their gods. To me personally I would not associate "chanting" with my attitude toward an Epicurean god in any way, even though I find singing and various types of music to be very pleasing. That is just an indication that you and I are different, and the more people we polled the more differences would arise, all of which preferences could be entirely consistent with Epicurean philosophy if they bring pleasure to the people holding them.

In both my examples I am just emphasizing that I think it is very dangerous to jump to conclusions and suggest particular applications that should apply across the board. We have a tremendous amount to do in order to get a good picture of what we DO know, so much so that I personally recoil from too much speculation about what we don't know.

And I say that especially in the context of "Society of Epicurus." I think it is absolutely fine for you Hiram or anyone else to define their own perspective on pleasurable living and unite a community that feels the same way. My comments and reservations are simply that - since we are discussing an organization called "Society of Epicurus" -- my personal opinion is that the more specific you are in endorsing particular practices, the more you stray from a "philosophy" into the realm of a particular type of community.

I don't know if I am getting my point across but to repeat it, I am all in favor of particular communities studying Epicurean principles as an aide in their own decisions about how to live. What you are discussing is totally appropriate for something with a name like "The Hiram Crespo Society of Epicureans." And of course since it is still somewhat a free country there is no stopping you from naming it anything you like, including a broad name like Society of Epicurus. My comments are just comments to register my view that by implying that particular preferences are identical with Epicurean philosophy, the result is something that I don't think Epicurus would approve of, because you are implying that one single set of preferences alone are consistent with Epicurus, when (in my view) that is clearly not the case.

No doubt you would reply that you think I am promoting a "Cassius Amicus Interpretation of Epicurus." But in dealing with that back and forth, the important distinction is that I recognize that some or all of your preferences are legitimate lifestyle choices if they bring you (and

people like you) pleasure. All I am saying is that not everyone agrees with those lifestyle choices and I think it is improper to suggest that Epicurean philosophy leads to a single set for everyone.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of December 30, 2019 at 7:08 PM**

Yes, and I should say also that the specific social actions you endorse, Hiram, are often ones I agree with. As Cassius says, I just don't leap there by saying these are the things Epicurus would recognize for anyone in a given situation. Instead, humans have different preferences.

There could be Epicurean groups endorsing the opposite actions from yours, made of individuals who came to the same conclusions for their pleasure.

The way you frame it is as if your desired behaviors apply to all Epicureans, and that's not true.

I used to get frustrated when talking to people about policies we both wanted, like a certain piece of legislation, because they assumed I endorsed their reasons for it. "It causes the most pleasure for the most people", they'd say, "and that's why we want it." And I'd say "no, I want it, but not for that reason-- I hate utilitarianism-- it's cold and unfeeling. It leaves out who these others are." We could still agree to do it, but not on the reasons. This feels similar.

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### **Post by “Hiram” of December 31, 2019 at 10:36 AM**

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

No doubt you would reply that you think I am promoting a "Cassius Amicus Interpretation of Epicurus." But in dealing with that back and forth, the important distinction is that I recognize that some or all of your preferences are legitimate lifestyle choices if they bring you (and people like you) pleasure. All I am saying is that not everyone agrees with those lifestyle choices and I think it is improper to suggest that Epicurean philosophy leads to a single set for everyone.

I suppose I disagree in that when you have empirical evidence for something (in this case, a study on the benefits of any number of pious practices), you are not discussing culture, but nature. And you are also dismissing canonic (because, empirical) insight.

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### **Post by “Hiram” of December 31, 2019 at 10:43 AM**

#### [Quote from Elayne](#)

The way you frame it is as if your desired behaviors apply to all Epicureans, and that's not true.

I guess the question of should each modern Epicurean engage in these "experiments in piety" is a separate question, that can be asked separately by different individuals or groups.

But the point I'm making is a different one: that the ideas attributed to Epicurus in On Piety (that true, material, natural piety has psycho-somatic, observable repercussions) has a solid foundation of empirical evidence. That certain ethical or pious practices do seem to affect the health of mind and body. And modern Epicureans should be happy to accept that vindication with curiosity, and referring it back to the sources. We should be happy to say: "Look! Epicurus was on to something here!"

Also, chanting happens in both Catholic rosaries and Buddhist and Hindu mantras, so this is not a vindication of a particular culture or chant. These studies vindicate a NATURAL process, not the cultures in case.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of December 31, 2019 at 11:14 AM**

Hiram, ok, if you are asserting that the science on pious practices is solid, please give me a study. I haven't seen one yet without gaping holes and confounding factors, but I'm happy to review your sources. Also, even if you found clear evidence that a religious practice had strong pleasure benefits, you'd need to repeat that research in materialists, because it might not generalize.

The mindfulness research, for instance, is a big mess. And there are increasing concerns about adverse effects in long term practitioners.

I'm always thrilled to have a conversation based on actual evidence-- we can work with that!

For most things I know of in medicine, any specific treatment has risks (pain or possible pain) and benefits (pleasure or possible pleasure), and it will also have a percentage who don't respond. The tetanus vaccine is near 100% effective but not much else. So a wise Epicurean would look at the stats, see if any precautions applied to them personally, and decide.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2019 at 11:48 AM**

I want to say this before I forget and then I come back to more:

When Hiram says

[Quote from Hiram](#)

chanting happens in both Catholic rosaries and Buddhist and Hindu mantras, so

I will go ahead and go on record that I find in general things that I identify as distinguishing traits of catholic or buddhist or hindu practices personally repelling and something to separate myself from, not endorse or accept as something that I would incorporate in my life unnecessarily. Of course at the same time I fully admit that that's "just me," and some others no doubt find them warm and cuddly. To each his own!

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2019 at 11:53 AM**

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Hiram, ok, if you are asserting that the science on pious practices is solid, please give me a study.

Yes, agreed.

So far the example I see being cited is "chanting."

For me personally, if I hear someone chanting I am going to head for the nearest exit as quickly as possible. All the while I admit that the chanter may be a wonderful person and given leisure time to investigate I might find them to be my closest friend. But pleasure and pain are subjective, and I personally classify chanting as painful for me to hear, just as it would be painful for me to hear the "muslim call to prayer" that some people seem to think is the most beautiful thing they have ever heard.

The point here is not that chanting or the muslim or call to prayer cannot be extremely pleasurable to some people. I know that it can be and is. But it is not so for everyone, and what we are talking about here is incorporating general observations of philosophy into a "Society of Epicurus." Rename it "Society of Eastern Rite Epicureans" and that would be another discussion entirely.

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### **Post by "Hiram" of December 31, 2019 at 12:04 PM**

I know of the benefits of chanting from experience, so this passed the test of the canon for me many years ago, but I specifically cited Diamond in my book, but [a quick google search gives others:](#)

*Neuro-scientist Marian Diamond from the University of California found that chanting **helps block the release of stress hormones and increases immune function. It also keeps our muscles and joints flexible for a long time.***

For our purposes, we are looking for psycho-somatic effects of pious activities, in other words bodily and mental effects. Diamond proved that Epicurus was on to something there, that we can cultivate certain pleasant / healthy and happy dispositions through ethical / pious practices.

I want to stress here that **the point is not to say "Epicurans should do this", but to say "see, Epicurus was on to something" and to show how he placed piety in the body. And that this is a unique contribution of Epicurus to ethics.**

(I cite a Marian Diamond source in my book, but I don't have my book with me, I'm at work. But [Diamond died in 2017 and was also a neuroscientist](#), so the study of chanting and contemplation is mainly happening in that field, and Sam Harris is probably the main proponent)

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A study by Dr Alan Watkins [senior lecturer in neuroscience at Imperial College London] revealed that **while chanting, our heart rate and blood pressure dip to its lowest in the day**. Doctors say that even listening to chants normalises adrenalin levels, brain wave pattern and lowers cholesterol levels.

(I searched for this, [there's a study on Gregorian chants](#) in particular but he also did a study on sports and endurance that I can't open because it's PDF and my browser is acting up)

Also, atheist author and neuroscientist Sam Harris has participated in studies on the brain while meditating. This is a whole emerging science. His essay [Killing the Buddha](#) inspired, in part, the chapter on contemplation in my book. He was arguing that if contemplation is scientific, then it is NOT merely Buddhist, just as alchemy became chemistry and is no longer Islamic. He says there needs to be a "SCIENCE of contemplation". In his essay [How to Meditate](#), Harris cites many studies here:

*Cultivating this quality of mind has been shown to [modulate pain](#), mitigate [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), improve [cognitive function](#), and even produce [changes in gray matter density](#) in regions of the brain related to learning and memory, emotional regulation, and self awareness.*

The science here is still emerging.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of December 31, 2019 at 12:44 PM**

Cool, Hiram, I will look at some of those studies and give you my impression. I can't respond to a google search-- there aren't hours enough lol, but I'm happy to review the specific studies you listed if I can get access to the full text, and I enjoy that kind of thing.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of December 31, 2019 at 1:33 PM**

Hiram, I'll give my impressions as I go. The chanting link you gave was to a daily mail article, interviewing a Dr. Alan Watkins, but I cannot find the study on Pubmed and wonder if unpublished. The Daily Mail says his study was 5 monks and showed decreased HR/BP during chanting.

If this was a study, 5 people is not enough to make any conclusion from. No control group of

non-monks. No mention of their body position during chanting compared to the rest of the day. No mention of effects outside the chanting period, which would make health effects uncertain.

I'd like to see exploration of whether the person needs to have an associated spiritual attitude or whether they can just repeat any noise (in which case this isn't a "pious practice"), or whether singing in a nonchant way is any different. Or can you cuss? I find cussing pretty satisfying sometimes, lol.

For our purposes, we'd want to know about subjective pleasure, not just HR/BP.

My other concern is that this guy is associated with the Cardiac Coherence Institute, a successor to HeartMath, widely considered to be quackery by scientists.

<https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/energy-medicin...-pseudoscience/>

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### **Post by “Elayne” of December 31, 2019 at 2:16 PM**

I have looked at the pain study. This was 15 people--interestingly, it started with 18 and they removed 3, a whole 1/6th of their study population, one because of being too sensitive to the heat stimulus. So ldk what that means for people who are sensitive to pain from heat.

The researchers had them rate pain from a heat stimulus, then did MRI with that stimulus before and after 4 day's mindfulness training. They were instructed that this was secular, but there were no interviews to ask subjects whether they themselves felt it to be spiritual. That would affect whether this is a pious practice or something else.

There was no sham meditation control group. There was a within group control of rest vs active meditation, but that doesn't rule out expectations of effectiveness. Some studies like this try to look for subject bias/placebo effect by asking in advance whether the subject thinks the experimental condition will have an effect.

There was a 40% reduction in subjective pain, on average, although the raw data is not provided. Mainly they were looking for fMRI correlates in brain activity to pain responses before and after meditation.

I would say, again, small study. Hard to say what it means. In regards to practical use for

pleasure, if this study holds up in replicated trials by other labs, it means that people not in pain who use mindfulness meditation are able to tolerate heat with less pain.

It doesn't address chronic pain, and responses to one noxious stimulus are not always generalized to others.

So think about that-- is it a good idea, for pleasure, to mess with your pain response, which in the case of heat protects you from painful tissue damage? I'd like to keep my pain function fully intact, unless I have otherwise untreatable chronic pain.

Finally, even for chronic pain, I'd want to compare side effects of long term use of various modalities, in order to do a full hedonic calculus.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of December 31, 2019 at 3:04 PM**

The full text of the anxiety article requires paid access, but it does say there was only a 4 day intervention. Since you cited it to me, I assume that means you read the paper-- can you tell me the study design?

Here is a review with a summary of the methodological issues with mindfulness research you might be interested in. [https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/...st\\_its\\_mind.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/...st_its_mind.pdf)

Here is an analysis by Cochrane (reputable) on mindfulness in women with breast cancer. It appears to have a small and temporary effect on anxiety. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/m/pubmed/30916...s%20mindfulness>

A breast cancer patient might want to look at that but also consider the possibility of adverse effects mentioned above.

When you find the specific study by Diamond, let me know, if you want to. I read the Harris book and was not impressed, but if there is a specific study he mentions that you like, please send me the citation.

In general, if you are going to recommend specific practices to readers on a medical evidence basis, I think it's wisest to read the studies closely yourself. Relying on the opinion of an author about a study might get you in the weeds. I don't know about you, but I feel pain if I recommend an intervention and it makes things worse or delays more effective treatment.

I suspect mindfulness may have some uses, but before advising something like that, considering the time involved and possible adverse reactions, I would want to know the details of the research. I do this for prescriptions too.

Finally, our goal of pleasure would require a different study design assessing global pleasure during and after treatment. One pain might be lessened while adding a new one, and a well planned study could look for that.

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**Post by “Hiram” of December 31, 2019 at 3:10 PM**

[Quote from Oscar](#)

his guest says something along the lines of well then Epicurus must be true, and SH totally ignores this and moves topic. SH lost all my respect that day. I won't listen and recommend him since he's a salesman and I'm not interested in buying what he's selling.

...

Of course I encourage listening to the whole conversation but we're all short on time and so the context is SH is talking with his guest, who attempts to refute the Epicurean argument about death being nothing to us...his guest presses SH to explain and accept the Epicurean argument which SH, at least to my senses seems to, disingenuously pretend to know and accept.

Shortly before the 55 minute mark, his guest again repeats "that's the Epicurean argument" to which SH seems so confused.

Sam Harris has ALWAYS ignored or been ignorant about Epicurus and is 100 % sold on secular Buddhism.

That's always been one of my main critiques of him. In my review of his "Moral Landscape" I argue that when he discusses the need for a nature-based morality, he is completely oblivious

to Polystratus and Epicurus' case for pleasure-based morality. I often feel that he's trying to reinvent the wheel

In my review of his "Waking Up" I also say that he's selling the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and that we need to posit a materialist theory of self to counter it.

Even then, he makes a few good points, and I give him credit for calling for a "science of contemplation", BUT I insist that **Epicurus was the first one to call for a science of contemplation**. He didn't say: "that's idealism and so we shouldn't talk about it!". He called for the study of religiosity as a material, natural phenomenon and **referred the study of religious practices to what happens in the mind and IN THE BODY when people engage in religious practices**. That's why these quotes from "On Piety" are so important to me, because they can help us to continue the work of Epicurus in the modern age, and also to insert ourselves into these modern conversations and show how Epicurus had something to say and how he's being vindicated.

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### **Post by "Elayne" of December 31, 2019 at 3:15 PM**

I agree, study is worth doing, and worth doing well. That is why I think it's so important to really read those studies carefully, just as you would read a historical document. Journalist accounts are often very inaccurate.

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### **Post by "Elayne" of December 31, 2019 at 3:33 PM**

If I were designing a study to look at whether a specific mindfulness practice increases pleasure compared to something else a person could be doing in that same time (considering we are finite), I would compare it to asking one comparison group to do a personally pleasurable activity on the same schedule, and a control group who just rated their pleasure (that could cause them to change their routines, but control groups are impossible to rid of confounders in this type of project). And hey, maybe a group that did half the time mindfulness and half their fun activity.

I'd look at their pleasure/pain ratings during the activities and through the day, and for any ongoing effects. Best to do a long term study, at least a year, since these are practices people are being asked to do long term and some effects might take time.

My hypothesis would be that a personally chosen pleasurable activity will win over mindfulness. But like many scientists, I'm interested in any result, including the possibility mindfulness trumps fun for pleasure.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2019 at 4:31 PM**

### [Quote from Hiram](#)

Sam Harris has ALWAYS ignored or been ignorant about Epicurus and is 100 % sold on secular Buddhism.

WHY? Sam Harris is obviously a very smart guy, and he has no doubt been exposed to a reasonable degree of fundamental material on Epicurus.

I would put Ayn Rand in the same category. Smart person, no doubt exposed to core Epicurean ideas (at the very least through Nietzsche and no doubt much further, and superficially in tune with "happiness" being the goal of life.

And yet SILENCE where there should be ringing endorsement. WHY? I cannot but tend to put people like this into the category of those who are not "mistaken" but fully and consciously help obscure the history because they disagree with Epicurus on a fundamental level.

This plays into several threads we are talking about -- we are not going to convert people like Sam Harris, or Ayn Rand (even if she were alive) but especially those who embrace some form of nihilism / nothingness like runs rampart through the "eastern" viewpoints. So I don't see the need or desirability of "engaging" them other than publishing our own analysis and trying to get it into the hands of people who need it. But I don't expect those affiliated with the Sam Harris type of establishment to help me do it, nor would I devote any more attention to their opposing views than what is necessary to dissect, lay out the error, and point out the correct to anyone who might have gone their way but still be open to reflection.

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## **Post by “Hiram” of January 2, 2020 at 10:14 AM**

Ok, I have my book, chapter on contemplation, and the source I cited is:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7669835> - The effects of running and meditation on beta-endorphin, corticotropin-releasing hormone and cortisol in plasma, and on mood.

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<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1361002/> - on neuroplasticity and how the brain's physical structure changes with meditation --- here, both Epicurus and Lucretius predicted the field of neuroplasticity when they argued that people are able to change the shape of their brain. Lucretius said people do this via habituation or when they memorize certain movements / games; Epicurus expressed moral development in material terms by arguing that a morally mature person was RESPONSIBLE for transforming the "atomic structure" of her brain in "On Nature", Book 25: On Moral Development.

Here is Moral Responsibility and Moral Development in Epicurus - by [Susanne Bobzien](#)

[https://www.academia.edu/275084/Moral\\_Responsible\\_in\\_Epicurus](https://www.academia.edu/275084/Moral_Responsible_in_Epicurus)

Here is Lucretius' Book 4

Quote

And to whate'er pursuit

A man most clings absorbed, or what the affairs

On which we theretofore have tarried much,

And **mind hath strained upon the more**, we seem

In sleep not rarely to go at the same.

The lawyers seem to plead and cite decrees,

Commanders they to fight and go at frays,

Sailors to live in combat with the winds,

And we ourselves indeed to make this book,

And still to seek the nature of the world

And set it down, when once discovered, here

In these my country's leaves. Thus all pursuits,

All arts in general seem in sleeps to mock

And master the minds of men. And whosoever

Day after day for long to games have given  
Attention undivided, still they keep  
(As oft we note), even when they've ceased to grasp  
Those games with their own senses, **open paths**  
**Within the mind** wherethrough the idol-films  
Of just those games can come. And thus it is  
For many a day thereafter those appear  
Floating before the eyes, that even awake  
They think they view the dancers moving round  
Their supple limbs, and catch with both the ears  
The liquid song of harp and speaking chords ...

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### Post by “Hiram” of January 2, 2020 at 10:21 AM

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

This plays into several threads we are talking about -- we are not going to convert people like Sam Harris, or Ayn Rand (even if she were alive) but especially those who embrace some form of nihilism / nothingness like runs rampart through the "eastern" viewpoints.

And it's fine if you don't want to engage "them", but **many of their followers** are sincere students who are not sold on this or that view and it's advantageous for Epicureans to posit their alternative theories and narratives and to capitalize on the visibility that these discussions and these celebrities have to present and contrast our views to theirs. Many of these readers DO NOT KNOW what Epicureans have to say, so they have no way of judging it.

(I was once an avid reader of the "new atheists", and found Epicurean teachings in Hitchens' "Portable Atheist")

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### Post by “Elayne” of January 2, 2020 at 7:54 PM

Ok Hiram, the first study on runners and meditators was small and methods are behind a paywall, but the purpose was to correlate mood changes with CRH, corticotropin releasing hormone, using the stimuli of running vs meditation, and they found no differences between the runners and the meditators. Both groups were highly skilled so self-selected for liking the activity. Would have interesting if they'd crossed it over, lol, and had the meditators run, etc. It's hard to generalize pleasure obtained by a group who already know they like an activity to a random person. But it goes with the idea that if an individual likes an activity, they'll get pleasure from doing it and there will be biochemical evidence of that.

I wouldn't advise citing that study as evidence for benefit of meditation-- that wasn't the study question.

The one on gray matter changes did have full access. It was also very small, 20 meditators and 15 controls, and they were testing a hypothesis that specific areas of the cortex would be thicker in meditators. Although more would need to be done to confirm, that wouldn't be surprising -- it would fit with other research showing brain changes with activity. There was not any overall thickening of the cortex. Just in specific regions.

But then they did what appears to be a post-hoc analysis (not in their original hypothesis) of age-related changes, looking for correlations by age group, and this made the comparison groups even smaller. Post-hoc analysis gets called the spaghetti method-- throw the data on the wall and see what sticks. It's considered bad form because what looks like a pattern is more often not there in attempts to replicate. So I wouldn't draw any conclusions from that part.

None of that really has anything to do with pleasure though. We'd need to ask the subjects about that, to know if cortex thickening correlates with pleasure. I've never seen that specific question asked but it's not my area, so maybe it has been.

I hate to say it, but the state of medical research is very very poor. People are publishing to get tenure and promotions. If you read Cochrane reviews on a question, generally they will say things like "we located 500 studies on x thing. 495 did not meet criteria for study design (not blinded, etc) and the 5 remaining were too small to draw any conclusions from." I'm exaggerating a little, but it is pretty pitiful.

Anytime you want my feedback on a study you want to cite in a paper or book in the future, I'm happy to look at it if not behind a paywall.