

# How NOT To Escape Plato's Cave

**Post by “Cassius” of February 27, 2020 at 8:37 AM**

Thanks to Trey for suggesting this article, [Epicurus on the Three Obstacles to Happiness and Tranquility](#), and [this Reddit discussion](#).

The subject deserves a lot more time than I can give it right now, it gives us another opportunity to discuss the divergent viewpoints of Epicurus and the need to take a position on which is correct. That's why I entitled this post "How NOT To Escape Plato's Cave," because in my view if you follow the leads of this article you will not only never escape Plato's cave, you will assist in the chaining to the floor next to you the one philosopher who can show you the way to freedom.

The article is admirably clear about its position, and as a result we can take the opening paragraphs and highlight seven points that will jump out at you if you take the time to read the texts thoroughly for yourself, reflect on what the ancient writers who actually knew this material said about it, and put aside for the moment the modern analysis that much more deserves the label "neo-Stoic," as it hardly rises even to the level of "neo-Epicurean."

Here the opening paragraphs followed by my comments on each point.

According to **Epicurus** (341–270 B.C.E.), an ancient Greek philosopher and the founder of Epicureanism, the path to living the good life is self-evident. At bottom, there is something that we all seek for its own sake, and that is pleasure, just as we all seek to avoid the opposite of pleasure, pain. Since we all know with relative certainty the kinds of things that bring us both pleasure and pain, we can use this knowledge as the foundation for living the best possible life.

Not all pleasure, however, is created equal; Epicurus made key distinctions between the types and degrees of pleasures, and prioritized the attainment of long-term pleasure, or tranquility (ataraxia), over short-term pleasure. This is why a fairer characterization of his philosophy is to describe it as "tranquilist" rather than hedonistic.

We may engage in the hedonistic pursuit of short-term pleasure, for instance, by overindulging in the consumption of alcohol. In the longer term, however, this will decrease our overall amount of pleasure as we must face the consequences and pain of overindulgence: hangovers, alcoholism, the risk of physical disease and premature death, etc. For Epicurus, the tranquility associated with moderate satiation is to be valued more highly than the intense pursuit of short-term overindulgence. This ensures a maximization of the total amount of consistent pleasure attained over a lifetime. As Epicurus said:

(1) and (2) These points are closely related. *Epicurus did not hold that "the path to living the good life" is self-evident*, nor did he teach that "we all know with relative certainty the kinds of things that bring us both pleasure and pain." This kind of analysis exactly what you would expect from a Platonic jailer. Epicurus explicitly stated over and over that the way forward toward the best life requires the study of nature, and reflection on the meaning of what we observe. Anyone who reads book one of Lucretius, which is simply a poetic version of Epicurus' foundational masterpiece "On Nature," will be struck by the long chain of deductive analysis that starts with observing that nothing comes from nothing, and leads us step by step to concluding that the universe is boundless in size, infinite in space, filled with life on other worlds, and that our human "souls" are a material part of that same universe in which there are no supernatural gods, no rewards or punishments in this life for obeying the priests, and no life after death to compensate us for the time we waste listening to them while we live. None of that is in the least "self-evident." Nor did Epicurus teach that "we all know with relative certainty what brings us pleasure and pain." Once again Plato applies his chains because the guide of life in Epicurus is not *knowing* in the traditional Platonic / Aristotelian sense, but *feeling*

. The senses are our contacts with reality, and the feelings of pleasure and pain are our guides to life through a constantly moving universe in which there are no absolute rights and wrongs, goods and evils, but only contextual choices that will lead to pleasure or pain depending on our circumstances. Epicurus will teach you that there is no logical or mathematical or geometric shortcut to pleasurable living, but if you are deceived by the Platonists into thinking that such a formula is the only acceptable answer to the question of how to live, you will never escape the cave.

(3) (4) and (5) Epicurus did not hold that "not all pleasure is created equal." He quite explicitly held that all pleasure is desirable because it is pleasurable, just as all pain is undesirable because it is painful, and he did not provide an explicit list of "good pleasures" or "noble pleasures" or "worthy pleasures" to prioritize, which is what the article is implying. *"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."* (Letter to Menoeceus) Epicurus was very clear that every choice has to be evaluated according to the pain and pleasure that will result from it, but he emphatically did NOT state that "long-term" pleasure should be chosen in every case over "short-term" pleasure. He specifically stated in fact that *"And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."*

(6) Now we come to the true goal of the Platonist interpretation of Epicurus - the contention that Epicurus taught "tranquillism" rather than "hedonism." Think about these words - what does "tranquillism" mean other than "anesthesia," and why use the Greek form "hedonism" (with its derogatory connotations) rather than simply and clearly state that Epicurus taught that **pleasure** is the guide of life?

"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. 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."

So the "tranquillists" would have us understand that Epicurus taught that there are no gods to reward us in life, no heaven to reward us in death, that life is short while we are dead for an eternity afterwards, that pleasure is what makes life worth living, but that we are supposed to spend what time we have in what amounts to a drunken stupor, or in an effective coma,

because we are so afraid of any amount of pain that we cannot bare the thought of experiencing any pain whatsoever? **No Way.**

We discuss these issues all the time at Epicureanfriends.com, and there are many threads devoted to it, so I'll bring this post to an end. But if you want to add a statuette of Epicurus to your medicine cabinet, right between the aspirin and the oxycodone, and call him out on occasion when you're under some kind of stress that the aspirin won't handle, then by all means follow the lead of the "Epicurus on the Three Obstacles" article and "**knock yourself out.**"

But if you want to find out what Epicurus really taught, pick up Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy" and join for discussion those who are really committed to understanding Epicurus, and plant the explosives that will blow Plato's cave sky-high. And don't worry, the Stoics won't mind if they are caught in the explosion, because they are indifferent to all emotion anyway!

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**Post by "Elli" of February 27, 2020 at 10:07 AM**

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### Post by “Elli” of February 27, 2020 at 1:18 PM

Neoplatonists are everywhere, they are under every stone all over the places. Here on this youtube video is a "nice" lesson on the work by Plato "[Philebus](#)" given by Mr. Pierre Crimes (sorry Grimes) and the Noetic Society. 😊

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShRp6UW\\_hyA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShRp6UW_hyA)

<http://noeticsociety.org/>

The noetic society organizes seminars

e.g. seminar details:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1457-how-not-to-escape-plato-s-cave/>

Date:

Saturday and Sunday, November 2 and 3, 2019.

Schedule:

Saturday breakfast at 8am. Explorations from 9-11, 2-4, and 7-9. Lunch and dinner will take place during the breaks.

Sunday breakfast at 9am. Reflection and exploration from 10-12.

Location:

Sunset Beach Woman's Club 16812 Bayview Drive Sunset Beach, CA

Cost: \$150

**Wow ! The works of the great Plato for just 150 bucks? This is what we call the best value for money. Well, get up right now from your sofas, your beds, your chairs, your offices, and run...This extraordinary offer for attending seminars on Plato and for just \$150 it will not be tomorrow. 😄**

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## **Post by "Cassius" of February 29, 2020 at 3:25 AM**

**P.B:** Cool. I get the desire to separate Epicurus out from the tranquility nuts, we don't need another Buddha or Zeno, but I don't understand the distinction being made about hedonism. Hedone is the Greek word for pleasure. You used the word pleasure 28 times in the original post. If that's not driving home the centrality of hedone in Epicureanism, I don't know what it is.

Epicurean philosophy is one among several hedonistic philosophies, philosophies that put pleasure as the central focus, pleasurism if you prefer a neologism instead of the baggage hedonism carries in your mind. It carries no negative connotation in mine. To say that there is no Epicurean hedonism is to say that there is no systematic methodology to pleasure seeking in Epicureanism. Isn't that the whole point of Epicureanism? If you're going to deny tranquilism then you've got to embrace something so people can understand what you're selling.

**Cassius:** P.B., if I understand your post correctly, and I think I do, you are commenting on my reference to hedonism being a word with negative connotations and suggesting that it be embraced. I don't think you and I are far apart in the end, but here is what I would stress:

As far as my own writing goes, I am not interested in playing only to an audience of professional philosophers who are familiar with the technicalities and history of "hedonism." Epicurus taught in his native language, and he taught on a wide variety of topics, of which pleasure was only one of several highly important things. In the minds of normal and ordinary people (and I consider myself and the people who important to me to be "normal and ordinary") hedonism is a word from a foreign language that means an ultimately evil pursuit of immediate bodily pleasures at the expense of all other considerations. For those who do not speak classical Greek it is the equivalent of affixing a label like "Satanist" on an everyday atheist or agnostic. In modern discussion words like that intimidate, shut down discussion, and bury the issues, rather than reveal them. All for nothing, because Epicurean philosophy has far more to say than just commentary on pleasure.

So ultimately I do think that it is necessary to stress "pleasure" - or whatever the equivalent word is in the language we are working. And in fact I think the best immediate indication of whether someone is embracing Epicurus or running from his implications is how quickly and often that they use the word "pleasure." It is amazing to see how many articles and presentations are given about Epicurus than never mention pleasure at all, or which rush to immediately say "Pleasure to Epicurus did not really mean 'pleasure' as we use the word."

So I agree with you, I just dont like to use the untranslated Greek, especially in a form "hedon-ISM" that implies that Epicurus arbitrarily picked a desired result and made all else fit the result, rather than working out an accurate physics and epistemology, on which he concluded that pleasure is the ethical end, and without which he would never have reached that same conclusion.

So I think that there is a lot of work to be done to make clear "what we're selling." Your comment is exactly on point about the need to invest a lot of work and thought into how to do that and customize the presentation to the audience at hand. That's one of the main purposes of this group and a lot of the online work that a number of us are trying to do, so I hope you and other like-minded people will help us continue and expand that discussion.