

# "Choice" and "Avoidance"

**Post by "Don" of February 28, 2020 at 3:14 PM**

A foundational practice of Epicureans, both ancient and modern, is the exercise of what is usually referred to as "choice and avoidance." Epicurus' own writings return regularly to this. Cicero and Seneca both mention this in relation to Epicureans. Philodemus and Lucretius discuss the importance of "choice and avoidance." It is one of the most fundamental practices we do as we do all things as if Epicurus were watching. The standard, ubiquitous translation in scholarly and popular texts alike is "choice and avoidance."

However, the word "avoidance" strikes me as making this decision less immediate, less urgent, and less important than it truly is. We "avoid" mud puddles as we walk. We "avoid" potholes on the road. We "avoid" eating fatty foods. I know we're not into definitions, best with me one moment: Merriam-Webster defines "avoid" as "to keep away from : shun" and simply "to refrain from." To me, these make avoidance sound passive, like nothing more than keeping our distance from something and not truly confronting the options with which we must deal on a moment-by-moment basis. These definitions dance around the ideas conveyed by the Epicurean "choice and avoidance" practice, and the word itself strikes me as inadequate.

So, I returned to the sources. Epicurus urges us to say what we mean without obfuscation. What are the actual words that Epicurus used when speaking of "choice and avoidance"? Epicurus didn't speak English. So how did he himself convey this idea in Greek? What would Epicurus' prolepsis be off his words?

We can begin by looking at the title of Epicurus' lost work, Περὶ Αἰρέσεων καὶ Φυγῶν [Peri Haireseōn kai Phugōn] or On Choice and Avoidance as it's usually translated. First, the ending -ων is plural and would suggest, at least, On Choices and Avoidances, but that's the least of our concerns right now.

Let's take the first noun: αἰρέσεων, the genitive plural of αἵρεσις (hairesis). Αἵρεσις does indeed mean a deliberate choice, and it is also, coincidentally, the origin of the English word heresy. So, for now, we can accept that "choice" is an acceptable choice, as it were, to translate that word of the title.

Φυγῶν, on the other hand, is the genitive plural of φυγή [phugē] with connotations such as "flight in battle; dative φυγῇ adverbially, in hasty flight" and "flight or escape from a thing, avoidance of it." So, φυγῶν doesn't simply connote "avoidance" but the fleeing from something or the hasty escape from something. One doesn't simply "avoid" conflict in a battle; one runs from it. It is a matter of urgency!

So at this point, the title of Epicurus' work might better be conveyed by *Concerning Choices and Fleeing*. What other words does Epicurus use to convey the practice of "'choice' and 'avoidance'"?

Consider Principal Doctrine 25: "If at all critical times you do not connect each of your actions to the natural goal of life, but instead turn too soon to some other kind of goal in thinking whether **to avoid or pursue something**, then your thoughts and your actions will not be in harmony." Here we are told to decide "whether to avoid or pursue something" εἴ τε φυγήν εἴ τε δίωξις. We encounter φυγήν again, but now αἵρεσις "choice" is replaced by δίωξις meaning "chase, pursuit." So, "choice and avoidance" in this case takes on a sense of "from what should I flee or what should I pursue." Again, giving us a richer sense of the practice.

A last instance I'll consider is Epicurus' *Letter to Menoikos* where we read: "we honor [pleasure] in everything we accept or reject" in one translation of a line and "[Pleasure] is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion" in another translation of the same line. In these, we are to "accept and reject" or to engage in "choice" and "aversion." What does the original say? Αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς. The same words as the title of the lost book, but this time with different shades of meaning in translations.

In conclusion, "choice and avoidance" takes on a much deeper and richer sense for me if I go back to our founder's words. We must use English words like "choice," "chase," "pursuit," and "accept" to convey the full range of meaning of the first term; and "avoidance," "flight," "escape," "rejection," and "aversion" for the second. It's not simply "choosing" one option. It's not simply stepping around something to "avoid" it. It goes further than that.

Personally, I prefer to paraphrase the title of Epicurus' work and to refer to our practice by something like *On Acceptance and Rejection* or *On Pursuit and Flight*, or even *On Things to Choose and Things from which to Flee*. There are pains we should accept, and pleasures from which we should flee. There are pleasures we should pursue, and pains from which we should escape before they capture us. To me, this makes us much more responsible for our decisions περὶ αἵρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν and much more active in our lives than if we're simply picking one thing and stepping around something else. We are weighing the implications of our options and consciously pursuing the correct course of action or fleeing from the negative course as if from a terrible battle to literally save our lives.

I'm curious to hear other takes on whether it matters what we call this practice. Or do we just do it!

May you practice well! Εὖ πράττειν!

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**Post by "Cassius" of February 28, 2020 at 6:04 PM**

Wow that is in-depth analysis - thank you! You obviously have a lot of background in the Greek so I look forward to hearing more.

My comment is much more superficial but I still want to indicate my agreement - I think you are right and that it is inherently Epicurean to live passionately - to realize that time is of the essence because life is so short. So as you say we just don't "stroll around" (unless at that moment it is the most pleasurable option to us) we eagerly embrace life and the opportunities for pleasure it gives us. We should try not to waste a moment - and the words PURSUE and FLEE do communicate more strongly the energy we should invest in our living our lives.

Now no doubt some will wonder if "fleeing" doesn't indicate anxiety and fear, and I would say that would probably be a connotation of the word to limit in this context, but to the extent both pursuing and fleeing indicate "urgency" and "seriously" and the like, I think those completely apply.

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### Post by “Cassius” of February 28, 2020 at 6:09 PM

I think Thomas Jefferson would agree with you too, based on this excerpt from the letter to William Short. He may be contrasting fortitude with fleeing here, but I think more than that he is contrasting lack of energy vs energy in whatever we choose to do

#### Quote

I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that “that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided.” Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, **the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure;** fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road. Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up; take a seat with Correa, and come and see the finest portion of your country, which, if you have not forgotten, you still do not know,

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### Post by “Joshua” of March 6, 2020 at 4:05 PM

That is excellent, Eugenios. I should like to see you bring Vatican Saying 46 into your analysis; it seems (to an English reader) to support your conclusions!

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## Post by “Don” of March 6, 2020 at 9:37 PM

It doesn't take much urging for me to go down the research route 😊 And so...

VS 46 τὰς φαύλας συνηθείας ὡσπερ ἄνδρας πονηροὺς πολὺν χρόνον μέγα βλάψαντες τελείως ἐκδιώκομεν.

I would agree that VS 46 encourages us to take our choices seriously. The key words are **τελείως ἐκδιώκομεν**. I've seen them translated various ways:

- We utterly eliminate
- ...let us utterly drive from us.
- We cast off..
- Let us completely banish...

These do get at the general connotation of the words, but we must remember to never be satisfied with one translation for each brings a shade of meaning and dig into dictionaries to see how the original classical Greek was used:

**τελείως** means "absolutely, completely"

**ἐκδιώκομεν** means "We chase away, we banish"

So we are encouraged not simply to "get rid of" or "eliminate" something (*what* we'll get to in one moment) but to banish it completely so it will never return; chase it away absolutely, so far away it won't ever come back.

What are we chasing away? **τὰς φαύλας συνηθείας** St-Andre translates this as "common customs." I prefer "trivial, worthless habits" to make it more personal. I interpret these to be those habits that you don't even think of but that are harming your ability to pursue pleasure and are of no positive value. VS 46 describes these habits as being akin to "worthless, no-good people" that have been harming you for a long time. Too long! Drive them away from you completely, so far they'll never return!

This gets at the same immediacy and energy with which we should make our choices and rejections.

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## Post by "Don" of March 24, 2020 at 4:28 PM

I \*think\* I know the answer, but I'm going to throw this out there on this thread. No doubt I will engender some responses. 😊

Here is my query:

**IF** our "Choices and Rejections" make it possible for us to discern and decide which pleasures to choose and which pains to reject (and vice versa), is the "**faculty**" that **\*allows\* us to make those choices and rejections** (wisdom? prudence?) more important than the pleasures themselves? Or are the **pleasures themselves** (once they are chosen) that will lead to more pleasures the important part?

In other words: The Goal, the Telos, the Greatest Good is Pleasure; BUT the way to achieve the goal - the way to walk the path - is through the wisdom to make those choices and rejections. Pleasure = Goal; Wisdom (to make choices/rejections) = Instrumental Means... like Virtue is a Means to the Goal.

Have I answered my own question? Thoughts?

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## Post by "Cassius" of March 24, 2020 at 7:53 PM

Good way of asking the question. Well I think in answering that we have to consider this PD:

16. In but few things chance hinders a wise man, but the greatest and most important matters, reason has ordained, and throughout the whole period of life does and will ordain.

And as I understand it there are multiple / many references in Lucretius to "true reason."

So we are in no way at war with "reason" -- we are at war with TYPES of reason, and/or versions of abstract logic, which deprecate connections to the senses by saying that their results cannot be tested by the senses, or which are "true" despite what the senses can ever confirm. (And when we say senses we are also talking about observations of consequences, like wind against our skin, that we can observe either directly or with instruments, even though we cannot observe the thing itself.

So I think Epicurus makes clear that reason of a certain type is critical -- would that not be prudence too? And of course this is why DeWitt goes on and on about how ridiculous it is to consider Epicurus to be a strict empiricist, when so much of his philosophy is based on

DEDUCTIVE reasoning.

The best extended discussion of this argument is probably the Torquatus dialogue, but we can never forget this too from Book Four:

[\(1743 version\):](#)

Many more things of this kind we observe and wonder at, which attempt to overthrow the certainty of our senses, but to no purpose - for things of this sort generally deceive us upon account of the judgment of the mind which we apply to them, and so we conclude we see things which we really do not; for nothing is more difficult than to distinguish things clear and plain from such as are doubtful, to which the mind is ready to add its assent, as it is inclined to believe everything imparted by the senses.

Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards.

And yet allow that he knows this, I would ask (since he had nothing before, to lead him into such a knowledge) from whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what was it that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty?

You will find that knowledge of truth is originally derived from the senses, nor can the senses be contradicted, for whatever is able by the evidence of an opposite truth to convince the senses of falsehood, must be something of greater certainty than they. But what can deserve greater credit than the senses require from us? Will reason, derived from erring sense, claim the privilege to contradict it? Reason - that depends wholly upon the senses, which unless you allow to be true, all reason must be false. Can the ears correct the eyes? Or the touch the ears? Or will taste confute the touch? Or shall the nose or eyes convince the rest?

This, I think, cannot be, for every sense has a separate faculty of its own, each has its distinct powers; and therefore an object, soft or hard, hot or cold, must necessarily be distinguished as soft or hard, hot or cold, by one sense separately, that is, the touch. It is the sole province of another, the sight, to perceive the colors of things, and the several properties that belong to them. The taste has a distinct office. Odors particularly affect the smell, and sound the ears. And therefore it cannot be that one sense should correct another, nor can the same sense correct itself, since an equal credit ought to be given to each; and therefore whatever the senses at any time discover to us must be certain.

And though reason is not able to assign a cause why an object that is really four-square when near, should appear round when seen at a distance; yet, if we cannot explain this difficulty, it is better to give any solution, even a false one, than to deliver up all Certainty out of our power,

to break in upon our first principle of belief, and tear up all foundations upon which our life and security depend. For not only all reason must be overthrown, but life itself must be immediately extinguished, unless you give credit to your senses. These direct you to fly from a precipice and other evils of this sort which are to be avoided, and to pursue what tends to your security. All therefore is nothing more than an empty parade of words that can be offered against the certainty of sense.

Lastly, as in a building, if the principle rule of the artificer be not true, if his line be not exact, or his level bear in to the least to either side, every thing must needs be wrong and crooked, the whole fabric must be ill-shaped, declining, hanging over, leaning and irregular, so that some parts will seem ready to fall and tumble down, because the whole was at first disordered by false principles. So the reason of things must of necessity be wrong and false which is founded upon a false representation of the senses.

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## Post by "Cassius" of March 24, 2020 at 7:58 PM

To be sure I connect directly:

### [Quote from Eugenios](#)

IF our "Choices and Rejections" make it possible for us to discern and decide which pleasures to choose and which pains to reject (and vice versa), is the "faculty" that \*allows\* us to make those choices and rejections (wisdom? prudence?) more important than the pleasures themselves? Or are the pleasures themselves (once they are chosen) that will lead to more pleasures the important part?

In other words: The Goal, the Telos, the Greatest Good is Pleasure; BUT the way to achieve the goal - the way to walk the path - is through the wisdom to make those choices and rejections. Pleasure = Goal; Wisdom (to make choices/rejections) = Instrumental Means... like Virtue is a Means to the Goal.

Have I answered my own question? Thoughts?

As to the faculty that allows us to make these choices and avoidances, that is likely to be considered in Epicurean terms to be the "canon of truth," which in its three legs INCLUDES pleasure itself as one of the legs (feeling) along with the five senses and the anticipations.

Thus "the wisdom to make those choices and rejections" becomes intelligent application of the canon of truth, where "intelligent" means that we apply the three legs properly after learning how they operate, including through images, and the study of the three legs themselves.

I think you've pretty much answered your own questions properly. Wisdom is just like virtue, a tool toward the goal, which is made necessary due to human nature being what it is, which requires us to act in certain ways to pursue pleasure and avoid pain successfully.

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## Post by “DaveT” of February 26, 2026 at 1:03 PM

Hello [Don](#), @ Joshua [Kalosyni](#) I found Don's post from 2020 while reading Kalosyni's post from yesterday on using "Joy" as a goal. It started me thinking; how might one actually find the time to make choices or avoidances in a practical sense.

When I got to Don's post, the first thing that caught me, (I know this wasn't your main point) was a part of the quote below from [PD25](#): "If at all *critical times*, you do not connect your actions...."

And then when I compared PD 25 with the quotation below from the Letter to Menoikos "...the *starting point* of every choice and aversion...." I saw a distinction between the two concepts and particularly I wondered about the time periods of Epicurus' life when he wrote [PD25](#) and the Letter to Menoikos. **I mean to ask, which came first the generalization of at the *starting point* of every choice, etc, or the at *critical times*?**

**And this question is perhaps a subset of the foundational question of what does he mean by "at critical times"?**

And I think these two questions of mine are important for my consideration of [Kalosyni](#) 's post for the following reasons.

- 1. Who has the ability to make daily choices before the question arises or the sensation of pain, or excess pleasure arises?**
- 2. Did Epicurus expect us to constantly analyze our physical and mental states to gauge our, let's call it adjustments to balance our experiences to tend toward pleasure, or happiness or joy?**

If we all share the sensations of daily life, it seems worthy of knowing **did Epicurus originally in time say "at the start of" and later decide to clarify his teaching to remind his followers that they need to make choices at "critical time."**?

**I'd love to see various translations of Epicurus's use of the word Greek word for *critical* to help me better understand these issues. Thanks in advance.**

[Quote from Don](#)

Letter to Menoikos where we read: "we honor [pleasure] in everything we accept or reject" in one translation of a line and "[Pleasure] is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion" in another translation of the same line. In these, we are to "accept and reject" or to engage in "choice" and "aversion." What does the original say? Αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς. The same words as the title of the lost book, but this time with different shades of meaning in translations.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

Consider Principal Doctrine 25: "If at all critical times you do not connect each of your actions to the natural goal of life, but instead turn too soon to some other kind of goal in thinking whether to avoid or pursue something, then your thoughts and your actions will not be in harmony." Here we are told to decide "whether to avoid or pursue something" εἴ τε φυγὴν εἴ τε δίωξις. We encounter φυγὴν again, but now αἰρεσις "choice" is replaced by δίωξις meaning "chase, pursuit." So, "choice and avoidance" in this case takes on a sense of "from what should I flee or what should I pursue." Again, giving us a richer sense of the practice.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of February 26, 2026 at 7:55 PM**

Just for the record...Bailey's translation of [PD25](#):

"If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other, nearer, standard, when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles."

#### [Quote from DaveT](#)

1. Who has the ability to make daily choices before the question arises or the sensation of pain, or excess pleasure arises?

We have only two options: to learn from other's mistakes (or their advice) or to learn from our own mistakes.

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### **Post by “DaveT” of February 28, 2026 at 10:47 AM**

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

We have only two options: to learn from other's mistakes (or their advice) or to learn from our own mistakes.

Yes in many ways this is true and vital for each of us. Yet, I'm thinking about how Epicurus thought we ought to navigate within our ordinary daily habits and small choices. I think they are barely noticeable to us as we go about the day. Retrospective reviews of our past actions in pursuit of reduced anxiety or physical pleasure are easier (if we are introspective from time to time). Like recognizing that carrying that 30 extra pounds is the result of engaging in unnecessary desires over the last x number of years is not healthy and we maybe, ought to eat less.

Certainly the small things that happen every day add up. Like negative thinking, and who among us has the skill set to analyze our daily lives in an ongoing manner to address and reduce negative thinking or on the physical side, over eating, much less reducing physical pain or discomfort? Perhaps my examples are poor ones, and they certainly are not meant to be exclusive.

And this is why I originally asked if Epicurus was saying we ought to make choices just at "critical times" in his later writings (if it was later in his life), as opposed to frequently making choices and avoidances in our mundane daily lives (which seems nearly impossible as an ongoing practice to be happy).

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## **Post by "Kalosyni" of February 28, 2026 at 12:21 PM**

### [Quote from DaveT](#)

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It is a skill set that we learn over time, and get better at through continued practice.