

Episode Thirty - Only A Limited Number of Combinations of Atoms Is Possible

Post by "Cassius" of July 26, 2020 at 8:54 AM

Welcome to Episode Thirty of Lucretius Today.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. Be aware that none of us are professional philosophers, and everyone here is a self-taught Epicurean. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book, "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

Before we start, here are three ground rules.

First: Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it, which may or may not agree with what you here about Epicurus at other places today.

Second: We aren't talking about Lucretius with the goal of promoting any modern political perspective. Epicurus must be understood on his own, and not in terms of competitive schools which may seem similar to Epicurus, but are fundamentally different and incompatible, such as Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, Taoism, Atheism, and Marxism.

Third: The essential base of Epicurean philosophy is a fundamental view of the nature of the universe. When you read the words of Lucretius you will find that Epicurus did not teach the pursuit of virtue or of luxury or of simple living. or science, as ends in themselves, but rather the pursuit of pleasure. From this perspective it is **feeling** which is the guide to life, and not supernatural gods, idealism, or virtue ethics. And as important as anything else, Epicurus taught that there is no life after death, and that any happiness we will ever have must come in THIS life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

Now let's join the discussion with today's text:

Latin text location: Approximately [lines 661 - 729](#)

Munro Summary: [Notes on the text](#)

661—699: in this way sheep horses and cattle, eating the same grass and drinking from the same river, all keep their distinctive differences; thus grass and each river must contain most different elements: nay the parts of the same animal are quite different; and are formed therefore of different elements: then too fuel must contain elements of fire and flame and ash; then many things have divers properties, colour flavour and smell; and these have all different elements as they enter things in different ways; things therefore must be of mixed seed: again as the same letters are common to different words, so the same elements may be common to most different things, to men and corn and trees.

700—729: but all elements cannot unite in all ways: else monsters of all kinds would arise: every creature has its fixed seeds, its fixed mother; and thus is kept within its limits; and of the elements it takes as food some only remain, others are rejected as unsuitable: and so it is with inanimate as well as animate things; they have each elements different or differently combined; and the modes of action of these elements differ, so that not only living bodies, but all nature, earth sea and heaven, are kept distinct. 700 foll. this question is more fully discussed v 837—

Daniel Browne:

But to return, we see the woolly sheep, the warlike breed of horses, and horned bulls, living under the same covert of the sky, grazing together in the same field, and quenching their thirst in the same stream of water; yet they are each of a different species, and retain the nature of their sires, and every kind imitates the dispositions of the race from which they came, so different is the nature of the seeds in every herb, so various are the principles of the water in every stream. Now though blood, bones, veins, heat, moisture, bowels, nerves, go to the formation of every animal, yet of what variety of figures, widely different in themselves, do their seeds consist?

And then all bodies that are combustible, and burnt by fire, if they agree on nothing else, yet discharge from themselves such parts, by which they spread about their flame and light; from whence they raise sparkles, and scatter their embers all abroad. So if you examine other things by the same rule, you will find seeds of different kind lie concealed in all bodies within, and show themselves of a different figure.

Lastly, you observe many things that emit both smell and taste, especially those victims you offer when your mind is religiously moved for something you have unjustly acquired. These sensations, therefore, must be raised by seeds of different figure; for smell pierces through pores where taste can find no passage. The juice likewise, and the taste of things, affect the sense by proper organs, to convince that their seeds vary in their figure. Principles therefore of various shape make up every particular mass, and things in general are composed of mingled seeds; for, in these verses of mine, you may all along observe that many letters are common to many words, and yet you must confess, that some verses and some words consist of very different letters, not because the number of letters are few, or no two words are formed of the same letters, but because every verse and every word is composed of letters altogether different. So, though the same principles are common to many things, yet the things may remain very different among themselves; and it may properly enough be said that men, and fruits, and pleasant trees are made up of different seeds.

Yet we are not to suppose that all seeds of whatever figure do mutually unite to the production of beings, for then you would observe monsters springing up every day, creatures half man, half horse, the lofty boughs of trees growing out of a living body, and the limbs of land animals joined to the bodies of fish, and nature forming every where out of the earth (the mother of all things) Chimaeras from their dreadful mouths breathing out flames; but 'tis plain, nothing of this happens, since we see all things are formed from certain seeds, and regular principles, and preserve their kind as they grow up and increase.

Nor indeed can it, by the fixed rules of reason, be otherwise; for, out of the several sorts of food, the particles of that which is proper to every animal descend into the limbs, and there united, produce the motions suitable to that animal; but, on the contrary, those particles of food that are destructive, some of them, we find, nature throws off through open passages, others are, insensibly to us, forced out of the body through the pores, such as would admit of no Union with others, nor agree to promote the vital motions and purposes of life.

But lest you should think that living creatures only are bound by these laws, the same reason holds with regard to all other beings; for as all bodies are in their nature different in themselves, so it is necessary that each should consist of principles of a different figure, not but that many seeds are the same in shape, but they do not all agree in form perfectly alike. Since then the seeds differ, it is necessary that their intervals, their courses, connections, weights, strokes, concussions, and motions, should differ likewise; Properties, that not only make a distinction between animals, but divide the Earth and the Sea, and preserve the heavens separate from the earth, and secure all things from being confusedly mingled together.

Munro:

And so the woolly flocks and the martial breed of horses and homed herds, though often cropping the grass from one field beneath the same canopy of heaven and slaking their thirst from one stream of water, yet have all their life a dissimilar appearance and retain the nature of their parents and severally imitate their ways each after its kind: so great is the diversity of matter in any kind of herbage, so great in every river. And hence, too, any one you please out of the whole number of living creatures is made up of bones, blood, vein, heat, moisture, flesh, sinews; and these things again differ widely from one another and are composed of first-beginnings of unlike shape.

Furthermore whatever things are set on fire and burned, store up in their body, if nothing else, at least those particles, out of which they may radiate fire and send out light and make sparks fly and scatter embers all about.

If you will go over all other things by a like process of reasoning, you will thus find that they conceal in their body the seeds of many things and contain elements of various shapes. Again you see many things to which are given at once both color and taste together with smell; especially those many offerings [which are burned on the altars].

These must therefore be made up of elements of different shapes; for smell enters in where color passes not into the frame, color too in one way, taste in another makes its entrance into the senses; so that you know they differ in the shapes of their first elements. Therefore unlike forms unite into one mass and things are made up of a mixture of seed. Throughout moreover these very verses of ours you see many elements common to many words, though yet you must admit that the verses and words one with another are different and composed of different elements; not that but few letters which are in common run through them or that no two words or verses one with another are made up entirely of the same, but because as a rule they do not all resemble one the other. Thus also though in other things there are many first-beginnings common to many things, yet they can make up one with the other a quite dissimilar whole; so that men and corn and joyous trees may fairly be said to consist of different elements.

And yet we are not to suppose that all things can be joined together in all ways; for then you would see prodigies produced on all hands, forms springing up half man half beast and sometimes tall boughs sprouting from the living body, and many limbs of land-creatures joined with those of sea-animals, nature too throughout the all-bearing lands feeding chimeras which breathed flames from noisome mouth. It is plain however that nothing of the sort is done, since we see that all things produced from fixed seeds and a fixed mother can in growing preserve the marks of their kind. This you are to know must take place after a fixed law.

For the particles suitable for each thing from all kinds of food when inside the body pass into the frame and joining on produce the appropriate motions; but on the other hand we see nature throw out on the earth those that are alien, and many things with their unseen bodies fly out of the body impelled by blows: those I mean which have not been able to join on to any part nor when inside to feel in unison with and adopt the vital motions.

But lest you haply suppose that living things alone are bound by these conditions, such a law keeps all things within their limits. For even as things begotten are in their whole nature all unlike one the other, thus each must consist of first-beginnings of unlike shape; not that a scanty number are possessed of a like form, but because as a rule they do not all resemble one the other. Again since the seeds differ, there must be a difference in the spaces between, the passages, the connections, the weights, the blows, the clashings, the motions; all which not only disjoin living bodies, but hold apart the lands and the whole sea, and keep all heaven away from the earth.

BAILEY:

And so often fleecy flocks and he warrior brood of horses and horned herds, cropping the grass from one field beneath the same canopy of heaven, and slaking their thirst from one stream of water, yet live their life with different aspect, and keep the nature of their parents and imitate their ways each after his own kind. So great is the difference of matter in any kind of grass you will, so great in every stream. Moreover, any one living creature of them all is made of bones,

blood, veins, heat, moisture, flesh and sinews: and they as well are far different, formed as they are with first-beginnings of unlike shape.

Then once again, all things that are set ablaze and burnt up by fire, store in their body, if nothing else, yet at least those particles, from which they may be able to toss fire abroad and shoot out light, and make sparks fly, and scatter cinders far and wide. Traversing all other things with the like reasoning of your mind, you will find then that they hide in their body the seeds of many things and contain diverse shapes. Again, you see many things to which both colour and taste are given together with smell.

First of all, most of the offerings [burnt on the altars of the gods]: these then must needs be made of diverse shapes; for the burning smell pierces, where the hue passes not into the limbs, even so the hue in one way, the taste in another, finds its way into our senses; so that you may know that they differ in the shapes of their first-bodies. So different forms come together into one mass and things are made with mingled seeds. Nay, more, everywhere in these very verses of mine you see many letters common to many words, and yet you must needs grant that verses and words are formed of different letters, one from another; not that but a few letters run through them in common, or that no two of them are made of letters all the same, but that they are not all alike the same one with another. So in other things likewise since there are first-beginnings common to many things, yet they can exist with sums different from one another: so that the human race and corn and glad trees are rightly said to be created of different particles.

And yet we must not think that all particles can be linked together in all ways, for you would see monsters created everywhere, forms coming to being half man, half beast, and sometimes tall branches growing out from a living body, and many limbs of land-beasts linked with beasts of the sea, and nature too throughout the lands, that are the parents of all things, feeding Chimaeras breathing flame from their noisome mouths. But it is clear to see that none of these things comes to be, since we see that all things are born of fixed seeds and a fixed parent, and can, as they grow, preserve their kind. You may be sure that that must needs come to pass by a fixed law.

For its own proper particles separate from every kind of food and pass within into the limbs of everything, and are there linked on and bring about the suitable movements. But, on the other hand, we see nature cast out alien matter on to the ground, and many things with bodies unseen flee from the body, driven by blows, which could not be linked to any part nor within feel the lively motions in harmony with the body and imitate them. But lest by chance you should think that living things alone are bound by these laws, the same condition sets a limit to all things. For even as all things begotten are in their whole nature unlike one to the other, so it must needs be that each is made of first-beginnings of a different shape; not that but a few are endowed with a like form, but that they are not all alike the same one with another. Moreover, since the seeds are different, there must needs be a difference in their spaces, passages, fastenings, weights, blows, meetings, movements, which not only sunder living things, but part

earth and the whole sea, and hold all the sky away from the earth.

Post by “Cassius” of August 6, 2020 at 11:33 PM

Episode 30 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available:

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/40185509>

Thanks for listening!

Post by “Don” of August 7, 2020 at 10:31 PM

This was a lively one!

I feel compelled to weigh in on the life of your fictitious scientist. I don't think one can just say that the pursuit of science bringing the scientist pleasure is the end of it. I seem to hear you saying that pleasure is the goal; the scientist experiences pleasure; that's it.

That's not the only aspect of the scientist's life we need to worry about. I agree that if the pursuit of science brings them pleasure, that's fine. But it cannot be the whole story and negate the need for the possession of a philosophy of life.

I would ask What is the totality of their life? How are they living it? Are they just? Are they making decisions to bring sustained pleasure to their whole life? The moment-by-moment experience of pleasure while researching or contemplating their scientific pursuit is not the goal. It is living a sustained pleasurable life. That's why Epicurus stressed that sometimes we should experience pain for the sake of later pleasure, and why we should abstain from some pleasure for more pleasure later.

It's not necessarily 24x7x365 immersion in pleasurable feelings all the time for your average human, Epicurean or not. The importance of a framework or philosophy of life is how you deal with life when it isn't providing pleasure. How do you return to that? How do you react when someone close to you dies? How do you experience hardship, disease, disappointment, and so on?

If experiencing individual pleasures is the only goal, and we come to this naturally (as I understand some of you were saying in this episode), of what use is Epicurus and his

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1640-episode-thirty-only-a-limited-number-of-combinations-of-atoms-is-possible/>

philosophy? If experiencing pleasure is the only important aspect of Epicureanism, and we naturally do this anyway, of what use is the philosophy at all? I have other things I could fill my time with.

I keep coming back to PD 10's "IF." IF the pleasure of the profligate dispelled their fears and anxieties, we'd have no quarrel with them. But their pleasures DON'T dispel their fears. But they're experiencing pleasure, so it's all okay then? I have to say no to that. I don't think that's the goal Epicurus taught. They are not living a life that can be sustained in pleasure. Now, if they were demonstrating they understood how to make prudent decisions to sustain their pleasure, that death is nothing to them and why, etc., and not simply running after every pleasure all the time, then, yeah, go forth and seize the day. I don't think that's what the "lost" (to translate the original word) are doing.

Likewise, the Letter to Menoikos:

Quote

So when we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasures of decadent people or the enjoyment of sleep, as is believed by those who are ignorant or who don't understand us or who are ill-disposed to us, but to be free from bodily pain and mental disturbance. For a pleasant life is produced not by drinking and endless parties and enjoying boys and women and consuming fish and other delicacies of an extravagant table, but by sober reasoning, searching out the cause of everything we accept or reject, and driving out opinions that cause the greatest trouble in the soul.

So the scientist's finding pleasure or joy in their work is fine as far as it goes. One should not tell them to stop. But pleasure or joy in that one thing is not the entirety of life.

Post by "Cassius" of August 8, 2020 at 6:36 AM

Thanks for commenting on this because yes I think this was a very interesting discussion and something that needs to be articulated better. I'm not sure we really understand the Polyaeus example either. I know Frances Wright treats it at some length, and now her commentary has replaced in my mind what may be in the ancient texts from which we are working.

Don do you agree that that the Polyaeus illustration is pretty much exactly on point? When I get back to the computer later today I will try to gather the actual references. I think we can trace them through footnotes in DeWitt if nowhere else.

Post by "Don" of August 8, 2020 at 8:59 AM

younger family. (Phil. Ep. vii. v. 8 v.)
POLYAENUS (Πολύαινος), literary. 1. Of ATHENS, an historical writer, mentioned by Eusebius. (*Chron.* i. p. 25.)
2. Of LAMPSACUS, the son of Athenodorus, a mathematician and a friend of Epicurus, adopted the philosophical system of his friend, and, although he had previously acquired great reputation as a mathematician, he now maintained with Epicurus the worthlessness of geometry. (Cic. *de Fin.* i. 6, *Acad.* ii. 33; Diog. Laërt. x. 24, ii. 105, with the note of Menagius.) It has been supposed that it was against this Polyænus that the treatise was written, a fragment of which has been discovered at Herculaneum under the title of Δημητρίου πρὸς τὰς Πολυαίνου ἀπορίας. (Schöll, *Geschichte d. Griech. Literatur*, vol. ii. p. 209.)
3. ILLIUS POLYAENUS, the author of four

Poor Polyænus! He has such an unfortunate English pronunciation to his name (Yes, evidently I'm 12 years old! "Many an.." you get the idea.) I saw the technical Latin pronunciation is pol-ee-EE-nuhs. The Greek is Πολύαινος (Polyainos), something like pol-Ü-eye-nos in Ancient Greek or modern Greek sort of like pol-EE-ehnos (I think).

He's not mentioned a lot in the ancient texts, but I think the dictionary entry above doesn't include Philodemus. I seem to remember mention of him mentioning Polyainos in his works.

DL mentions him by name, X.24:

Quote

Next came Polyænus,³⁷ son of Athenodorus, a citizen of Lampsacus, a just and kindly man, as Philodemus and his pupils affirm.

and footnote 37 reads

Quote

One of the four pillars of the school : a great geometer until he became an Epicurean (Cic. *Ac. Pr.* 106 and *De fin.* i. 20). A letter of Epicurus to him is mentioned by Seneca (*Ep.* 18. 9).

Cicero's *Academics* seems to just mention him by name. *De Fin* has this:

Quote

It is also unworthy of a natural philosopher to deny the infinite divisibility of matter; an error that assuredly Epicurus would have avoided, if he had been willing to let his friend

Polyaenus teach him geometry instead of making Polyaenus himself unlearn it.

and Seneca mentions this

Quote

(Seneca's Letters - Book I - Letter XVIII) Even Epicurus, the teacher of pleasure, used to observe stated intervals, during which he satisfied his hunger in a stingy ([maligne](#)) fashion; he wished to see whether he thereby fell short of full and complete happiness, and, if so, by what amount he fell short, and whether this amount was worth purchasing at the price of great effort. At any rate, he makes such a statement in the well known letter written to Polyaenus in the archonship of Charinus. Indeed, he boasts that he himself lived on less than a penny, but that Metrodorus, whose progress was not yet so great, needed a whole penny. Do you think that there can be fullness on such fare? Yes, and there is pleasure also, - not that shifty and fleeting Pleasure which needs a fillip now and then, but a pleasure that is steadfast and sure.

That's not a lot to go on. There's the [Wikipedia article](#) that mentions an Italian translation of fragments.

I think it's also worth noting the "stated intervals" of Epicurus fasting or eating minimally. This implies that he in fact didn't live on bread and water all the time (as some try to say) but it sounds like he did experiment from time to time during "stated intervals" to ascertain his limits as to what would satisfy him and provide pleasure/absence of pain of hunger. (Side note: it appears the actual coin mentioned by Seneca is the Roman as: Epicurus didn't require a whole "as" but Metrodorus did: Et quidem gloriatur non toto asse se pasci, Metrodorum, qui nondum tantum profecerit, toto.[Here is a site talking about the purchasing power of Roman coins.](#))

[Admin Edit: This post was copied and placed in [the forum devoted to Polyaenus.](#)]

Post by "Cassius" of August 8, 2020 at 2:30 PM

Great research, thank you! I was thinking that Frances Wright's treatment was probably her own overlay and it sounds like it might be . A good hypothesis about the truth, but in the end a hypothesis.

Post by “Godfrey” of August 8, 2020 at 4:39 PM

Just finished listening; great discussion!

To me, Martin said it most accurately and concisely: "it's natural." Epicurus didn't invent the Canon, he observed and articulated it. It's a natural process involving pleasure. As long as nothing is interfering with this process then no philosophy is necessary. But when wrong thinking, fears, religion and such interfere with the process, then correct philosophy is the medicine to get back on track.

So, at least for now, I'm with Elayne and Martin. Don's points are well taken however and bring the discussion to the fullness of pleasure. If the scientist has arranged his life to maximize pleasure then there's no reason to change. But if his marriage is a shambles, he's living on the streets, he's an alcoholic, etc, then he probably could use a philosophical intervention. In the latter case his cup of pleasure is full of muddy water.

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2020 at 6:25 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

As long as nothing is interfering with this process then no philosophy is necessary.

Godfrey how frequently do you think that this condition ("nothing is interfering with this process") will exist? Frequently enough that it ought to be considered a default position, on the order of observing that all young things at birth pursue pleasure and avoid pain? Or infrequently, but important to identify as the general rule? Or somewhere in between? What does the answer tell us about how we should state the general rule. Or is it useful or not useful to state a general rule?

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2020 at 6:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Godfrey how frequently do you think that this condition ("nothing is interfering with this process") will exist? Frequently enough that it ought to be considered a default position, on the order of observing that all young things at birth pursue pleasure and avoid pain? Or infrequently, but important to identify as the general rule? Or somewhere in between? What does the answer tell us about how we should state the general rule. Or is it useful or not useful to state a general rule?

I think you raise good points, [Godfrey](#) , but I would posit that one's life doesn't have to be in shambles to need a philosophy of life to come back to. I'll freely admit that most people's default is simply to deal with life's situations at random as they arise. But how do we make sense of life's ups and downs? How do we deal with tragedy? How do we orient ourselves to have sustained pleasure? Do we experience pain and frustration and see no bigger reason for it?

I do think that as infants, animals (incl. humans) seek to have their basic desires fulfilled to achieve pleasure (look at the face of a sleeping infant when a full belly). But rapidly, humans are acculturated. We learn to rationalize, to sublimate, to hide behind facades. "Smiles, everyone," as Mr. Roarke used to say on Fantasy Island. I think the answer to [Cassius](#) 's question on how often there's no interference is rarely (if I understand his question 😊)

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2020 at 7:25 PM

Yes Don you understand in perfectly.

In addition to looking at it "practically" I think there is a natural tendency ("anticipation"??) to be drawn to thinking about questions like "divinity.". (" Are we alone in the universe? Are there higher beings?) And so I think it is natural to need a framework for dealing with those issues.

Post by “Godfrey” of August 8, 2020 at 8:07 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Or is it useful or not useful to state a general rule?

To me the default and the general rule is the natural state. Beyond that, as with many things, I don't think it's useful to state as a general rule. However for me, personally, and probably for most of us in the forum, there is a great deal of baggage (cultural and/or otherwise) in the way of returning to this state and EP is the most valid philosophy for doing so. But there is no way to objectively determine whether or not a person is living in the natural state. I could think of a few acquaintances that seem to be, but if I asked them they may disabuse me of that idea! The opposite goes for the scientist in question: there's no way to judge the fullness of his cup.

[Quote from Don](#)

I would ask What is the totality of their life? How are they living it? Are they just? Are they making decisions to bring sustained pleasure to their whole life? The moment-by-moment experience of pleasure while researching or contemplating their scientific pursuit is not the goal. It is living a sustained pleasurable life.

So these questions from Don are the questions we need to ask of ourselves, discuss, and promote. But it seems pointless to try to ascertain how frequently the natural state is retained or under what conditions.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In addition to looking at it "practically" I think there is a natural tendency ("anticipation"??) to be drawn to thinking about questions like "divinity.". (" Are we alone in the universe? Are there higher beings?) And so I think it is natural to need a framework for dealing with those issues.

I totally agree with this. In fact our scientist is likely getting pleasure from dealing with these very questions, which relates to PD 10. So I guess my point is that we can't tell and shouldn't assume from someone's lifestyle whether or not they are living a life of pleasure, or how close they may be to the natural state.

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2020 at 9:10 PM

[Godfrey](#) : When you say:

Quote

To me the default and the general rule is the natural state.

Is the natural state the experience of pleasure, the seeking of pleasure, or something else? I'm not being critical! I just want to make sure I understand what you're referring to. Same with [Martin](#) , when he says "it's natural." Is it the experience or the pursuit of pleasure that is the natural state to which we need to return?

Post by “Godfrey” of August 8, 2020 at 9:22 PM

The natural state that I'm referring to is the smooth and integrated functioning of the sensations, prolepses and feelings. So it would be the experience of pleasure functioning in a way as to be a proper guide for the pursuit of pleasure.

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2020 at 10:03 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

The natural state that I'm referring to is the smooth and integrated functioning of the sensations, prolepses and feelings. So it would be the experience of pleasure functioning in a way as to be a proper guide for the pursuit of pleasure.

Got it! That helps, and well stated, [Godfrey](#) !

Post by “Godfrey” of August 8, 2020 at 10:49 PM

Looking again at my statement, it's actually circular in that the pursuit of something is guided by the experience of that thing. I think it's better stated as "the pursuit of desire fulfillment is guided by the experience of pleasure," and this could be an extremely critical point.

It's important to separate the faculty from the action, and if I'm not mistaken this is exactly what Epicurus is doing when read carefully. I've tended to conflate pleasure and desire. However he ranks desires (not pleasures) into the categories of natural and necessary, natural and not necessary, and vain. Pleasure itself (the faculty) is uniformly good. (I'm writing without referring to the texts so I could be putting words in his mouth, but this separation is how I've

been thinking about the philosophy lately. I'm not sure if the Greek backs this up or not 🤔. Or maybe it's obvious and I'm just a tad dull. 😊)

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2020 at 11:11 PM

I think you're onto something there, [Godfrey](#). I like where you going if I follow you correctly. I also like that you're making a clear distinction between the faculty of the Feelings (pleasure and pain) and the desires. The Feelings are part of the Canon, how we decide what actions to take, i.e., in what desires to pursue and what to reject. The goal or telos is the living of a pleasurable life.

There's only one edit I'd suggest to your statement:

Quote

"the pursuit of desire fulfillment is guided by the experience of pleasure **and pain**,"

I sometimes forget that the "Feelings are **two**: pleasure and pain." Epicurus sees value in both pleasure and pain as criteria by which we make our choices and rejections. We should pursue a sustained pleasurable life as the goal but use the Feelings of both pleasure and pain (along with the Anticipations and Senses) to make the choices that will result in that goal.

Post by “Martin” of August 10, 2020 at 10:24 AM

Regarding "it's natural" in the podcast of episode 30 at 43:34, I referred to the pursuit of pleasure as the natural choice, and Elayne asserted this, too.

Post by “Elayne” of August 10, 2020 at 12:02 PM

Ok, just getting to this... let me give a more complete description of my perspective.

I disagree with Don that it is inferior if a scientist makes pleasure primarily out of doing

research, vs some broader collection of pleasures. If that is the most reliable pleasure for the scientist, why wouldn't she choose it? "Moment-by-moment" pleasures can create an overall pleasurable life. I do not think comparing science and profligacy makes sense-- they are nowhere near the same. But I have an implicit assumption here which I need to make clear-- I am talking about a real scientist, one who understands the use of evidence the same way Epicurus did-- because that is science. Such a person would not have supernatural fears or be prone to non-evidence based contagious social ideas in the first place, because of having a scientific approach. That is the person's immunity to being dragged off track away from pleasure.

My scientist was not really hypothetical. My dad is a retired physicist and my mother was a mathematician. I never knew anyone who only did science, lol, but I grew up surrounded by scientists and their families, and they were among the happiest (meaning, for me, experiencing sustained pleasure) people I knew. They were not beset by superstition... but they were not explicitly philosophers either. Many of them spent long waking hours pursuing their research projects. They all had families whom they enjoyed spending time with as well, and like my dad, they often spent family time teaching their children about science. Some of my most pleasurable memories involve my dad teaching me physics, from early childhood. It was a central pleasure, which seems to me very similar to Epicurus' instructions about studying nature with friends.

I observe that if a person is securely absent supernatural beliefs, they often tend to intuitively do the hedonic calculus, and they are often quite skilled without a sense that they have a philosophy. And if they have lived a long life making wise choices but have not formally written down or thought out a philosophy, I am very resistant to saying their happy lives were just due to blind luck. No-- they were happy due to their understanding of the scientific process and their natural ability to choose pleasure (including sometimes experiencing pain for greater pleasure).

As an adult, I have met non-scientist atheists who understood just enough about science to feel secure in rejecting un-evidenced notions and social fads, and I have observed that these people, over time, develop great skill in choosing pleasure-- but they are not philosophers. This evidence, right in front of me, prevents me from making assertions that someone must have a philosophy to wisely choose a pleasurable life.

Epicurus was able to develop his philosophy because it (IMO) is the only one you can have if you are a scientist and pay attention to reality. No other philosophy holds up at all, under scrutiny.

My personal experience was to have been raised with a strong science foundation, and that was what helped me avoid ideas that make no sense, like Skepticism and various idealisms. I did not have doubt about these things being wrong. My natural enjoyment of pleasure became my

guide. So when I read Epicurus, I had joy to find someone who had the same perspectives, like a friend from long ago... but even before I found him and before I saw how he had beautifully put together the structure of his philosophy, I had learned to make wise choices for my life. I also had joy in realizing I could find other people who thought about life as I did, by looking for Epicureans. I am extremely glad I found Epicurus-- but I was also already practicing the philosophy without calling it one, and it was functioning well.

As far as obstacles go, for me they have not been alternative philosophies and superstitions but normal griefs of life-- which I feel fully when they come up. I am not afraid of my feelings, and similar to Epicurus I would say that the most severe griefs do not last in their most intense form very long, and the milder griefs are not difficult to cope with, when one focuses on activities that bring pleasure-- for me, the main antidote to grief is social pleasures. Hugging my friends and family, singing together, eating and talking together, etc. I have had many griefs in life, and that is what has worked for me-- I don't tend to philosophize about grief. Often pleasure is strong even after losses, when I think about how fortunate I was to have known and loved the person who is now gone, and take time to remember them. I find pleasure in the sensation of poignancy and nostalgia.

What I'm wondering if I hear in Don's words-- and maybe not, [Don](#) -- please correct me if I'm wrong-- is an implication that pleasures must not just be sustained but somehow of a superior type, perhaps what I call a "meaning project", and I disagree with that. Some people do require a meaning project for pleasure, but not everyone does. It is a matter of temperament and likely neurology. But I strongly disagree that there are inferior and superior pleasures, if the pleasures are truly equivalent in their fullness. There are no trivial vs important pleasures. That is idealism and abstract thinking creeping in. Then you wind up with people saying things like "we should not try to have pleasure but meaningfulness"-- but what is meaningfulness without pleasure? What is beauty? Why would anyone want any of these things without the pleasure in them?

It is quite possible to intuitively understand and practice this without ever being a philosopher, and I've seen it done and don't even think it is extraordinarily rare. We don't see those folks on our philosophy forums, because they probably don't even know it is a thing, but they are out there enjoying life.

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2020 at 12:34 PM

Quote from [Elayne](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1640-episode-thirty-only-a-limited-number-of-combinations-of-atoms-is-possible/>

What I'm wondering if I hear in Don's words-- and maybe not, Don -- please correct me if I'm wrong-- is an implication that pleasures must not just be sustained but somehow of a superior type, perhaps what I call a "meaning project", and I disagree with that.

I suspect that Don is going to clarify that but I don't want to interrupt the conversation further!

Post by “Don” of August 10, 2020 at 1:37 PM

[Elayne](#) : Thank you for that heartfelt response! With that additional context, I don't think we're as far apart as either of us originally thought 😊 . I'll try and give a fuller reply this evening.

As a teaser, I do not think pleasures need to be "superior" in some way. Stay tuned... 😊

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2020 at 2:50 PM

Don if you get a chance, 31 is now posted and even though Elayne is not on it, it bears on the discussion.

Post by “Don” of August 10, 2020 at 11:27 PM

Being that [Elayne](#) took the time to compose her reply, I want to respond in kind as thoughtfully and respectfully as possible.

Quote

I disagree with Don that it is inferior if a scientist makes pleasure primarily out of doing research, vs some broader collection of pleasures. **If that is the most reliable pleasure for the scientist, why wouldn't she choose it?** "Moment-by-moment" pleasures _can_ create an overall pleasurable life.

To be clear, I think it's neither inferior nor superior to any other pleasure. If their research gives them a "reliable pleasure", they should, by all means, choose it. And I agree that momentary

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1640-episode-thirty-only-a-limited-number-of-combinations-of-atoms-is-possible/>

pleasures can add up to long-term pleasures. My unease was that, in the podcast episode, I interpreted it as if this one activity - scientific research - was all-encompassing. I don't think you can judge someone's well-being on one activity. It seems I may have interpreted this incorrectly, and that the idea being advocated for was a scientific outlook on life.

Quote

I do not think comparing science and profligacy makes sense-- they are nowhere near the same. But I have an implicit assumption here which I need to make clear-- I am talking about a real scientist, one who understands the use of evidence the same way Epicurus did-- because that is science.

Please don't think I was equating science and profligacy. That was not my intention, and I apologize if that's what came across! My only intention in citing PD 10 and the *Letter to Menoikos* was the idea of singling out momentary pleasures without an eye to the sustained pleasures of a pleasurable life overall. I think [Cassius](#) and [Martin](#) addressed this in Episode 31 when they were talking about Polyaeus concentrating on *just* geometry before coming to Epicurus. Polyaeus - arguably - "broadened his horizons" and realized there was more to life than geometry although he didn't abandon his studies. He merely broadened his interests and integrated geometry into a broader study of nature. Again, my concern in bringing up PD 10 was concentrating on one kind of pleasure - the pursuit of scientific research in this case - and, as I mentioned above, I may have misinterpreted what was being conveyed.

Quote

Such a person would not have supernatural fears or be prone to non-evidence based contagious social ideas in the first place, because of having a scientific approach. That is the person's immunity to being dragged off track away from pleasure.

Now, we're getting to the idea that [Martin](#) so nicely put it in Episode 31 in talking about **implicit** vs **explicit** philosophies of life...

Quote

My scientist was not really hypothetical. My dad is a retired physicist and my mother was a mathematician. I never knew anyone who only did science, lol, but I grew up surrounded by scientists and their families, and they were among the happiest (meaning, for me, experiencing sustained pleasure) people I knew. They were not beset by superstition... but they were not explicitly philosophers either. Many of them spent long waking hours pursuing their research projects. They all had families whom they enjoyed spending time with as well, and like my dad, they often spent family time teaching their children about science. Some of my most pleasurable memories involve my dad teaching me physics, from early childhood. It was a central pleasure, which

seems to me very similar to Epicurus' instructions about studying nature with friends.

I observe that **if a person is securely absent supernatural beliefs, they often tend to intuitively do the hedonic calculus**, and they are often quite skilled **without a sense that they have a philosophy**. And if they have lived a long life making wise choices but have not formally written down or thought out a philosophy, I am very resistant to saying their happy lives were just due to blind luck. No-- they were happy due to their understanding of the scientific process and their natural ability to choose pleasure (including sometimes experiencing pain for greater pleasure).

"...without a sense that they have a philosophy..." From my understanding, this is exactly what [Martin](#) was saying about implicit and explicit philosophies. Everyone has a "philosophy of life" whether they express it that way or not. We all operate under certain paradigms, and I don't think "blind luck" has much to do with it. Although some people *do* operate that way, careening from drama to drama, highs to lows to highs to lows, with no underpinning framework.

I firmly believe that you don't have to formally acknowledge your "philosophy" - or even think through the ramifications of it - to have a "philosophy." That would be an implicit philosophy, one you don't give much thought to but which has grown up around you, within you, and with which you make decisions in your life. One's "*understanding of the scientific process and their natural ability to choose pleasure (including sometimes experiencing pain for greater pleasure)*" *is* their *philosophy of life*. As [Godfrey](#) said in an earlier post, Epicurus did not necessarily create the Canon or his Philosophy. It was a natural process which he examined, codified, and refined to make it easier for people to study and to make practical use of. That's not saying some don't stumble across it as a natural process. I would say it's even probably more likely that some will make use of Epicurean ideas *sans Epicureanism* in our modern secular society. Our modern scientific worldview owes a debt to Epicurus and Lucretius after all!

Quote

As an adult, I have met non-scientist atheists who understood just enough about science to feel secure in rejecting un-evidenced notions and social fads, and I have observed that these people, over time, develop great skill in choosing pleasure-- **but they are not philosophers**. This evidence, right in front of me, prevents me from making assertions that someone must have a philosophy to wisely choose a pleasurable life.

Epicurus was able to develop his philosophy because it (IMO) is the only one you can have if you are a scientist and pay attention to reality. No other philosophy holds up at all, under scrutiny.

"...but they are not philosophers..." That is exactly my point!



You don't have to be a capital-P Philosopher to have a "philosophy of life," an in-grained operating system, if you will, by which you make decisions about our life. And, again, Epicurus was observing Nature, how it worked, and examining it then teaching others to *consciously* apply what he observed and learned instead of having to make it up as they went along.

Quote

I am extremely glad I found Epicurus-- but I was also already practicing the philosophy without calling it one, and it was functioning well.

Exactly!! You were practicing the "philosophy" before you were practicing the Philosophy! I really think [Godfrey](#) really hit on something with...

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Epicurus didn't invent the Canon, he observed and articulated it. It's a natural process involving pleasure.

We can implicitly be "practicing Epicureans" without knowing that's what we're doing! And that may be enough for some people, but I still maintain that it's better to examine your philosophy of life explicitly to see where it's working, where it's not, and to see if there are others - either ancients or moderns, whether they be philosophers or other thinkers - who have worked out the kinks so to speak so you don't have to! It's not a requirement, but I think it can lead to a wider perspective and a deeper understanding of why you do what you do and how to do it better, more efficiently, and with more wisdom (It's a **philosophy**, after all).

Quote

As far as obstacles go, for me they have not been alternative philosophies and superstitions but normal griefs of life-- which I feel fully when they come up. I am not afraid of my feelings, and similar to Epicurus I would say that the most severe griefs do not last in their most intense form very long, and the milder griefs are not difficult to cope with, when one focuses on activities that bring pleasure-- for me, the main antidote to grief is social pleasures. Hugging my friends and family, singing together, eating and talking together, etc. I have had many griefs in life, and that is what has worked for me-- I don't tend to philosophize about grief. Often pleasure is strong even after losses, when I think about how fortunate I was to have known and loved the person who is now gone, and take time to remember them. I find pleasure in the sensation of poignancy and nostalgia.

[Elayne](#) , I thought this was eloquent and poignant, and I couldn't agree more! For myself, I have found that one of the best ways of dealing with grief - especially at funerals - is to embrace the celebration of the person's life. The loss is felt - and felt deeply - but I agree with Epicurus when

he says that we need to take pleasure in memories for what was. I felt this way before I found Epicurus, too!

I think we're getting hung up on the word "philosophize." Your "philosophy" about grief comes through loudly, beautifully, and eloquently here, and it is a full, rich philosophy.

Quote

What I'm wondering if I hear in Don's words-- and maybe not, [Don](#) -- please correct me if I'm wrong-- is an implication that pleasures must not just be sustained but somehow of a superior type, perhaps what I call a "meaning project", and I disagree with that. Some people do require a meaning project for pleasure, but not everyone does. It is a matter of temperament and likely neurology. But I strongly disagree that there are inferior and superior pleasures, if the pleasures are truly equivalent in their fullness. There are no trivial vs important pleasures. That is idealism and abstract thinking creeping in. Then you wind up with people saying things like "we should not try to have pleasure but meaningfulness"-- but what is meaningfulness without pleasure? What is beauty? Why would anyone want any of these things without the pleasure in them?

No, I do not think some pleasures are of a "superior" type. And I don't think there is any "meaning" to life - other than to live a sustained, pleasurable life while we are living. There is no Ultimate Meaning. We are atoms and void in this particular arrangement for a finite time. There is no meaning imposed by some supernatural being. Those who try to say their life has "meaning" - I think - are confusing it with well-being, satisfaction, ... dare I say pleasure.

I do not think there are superior and inferior pleasures. I *do* think there are positive and negative choices leading to more or less pain and/or pleasure. That's why I feel we can say the profligate who over-indulge in drinking, drugs, sex, etc., are not making "good" (not in a Platonic sense) decisions for themselves. That way does NOT lead to sustained pleasurable lives. A chilled glass of wine in the shade on a warm, summer day can be enjoyed with pleasure. Four bottles of whiskey imbibed in the street on a cold winter night may have brought pleasure for a short time, but it wil NOT lead to a sustained pleasurable life.

And I don't think there are trivial or important pleasures. There may be simple vs complex pleasures, but I don't think that's the same thing. As a matter of fact, I can walk through the woods, look up, and feel a wash of simple pleasure as I take in the delicate verdant patterns of sunlight through the leaves. I can take pleasure or satisfaction from completing a complex task with many steps.

Quote

It is quite possible to intuitively understand and practice this without ever being a philosopher, and I've seen it done and don't even think it is extraordinarily rare. We don't see those folks on our philosophy forums, because they probably don't

even know it is a thing, but they are out there enjoying life.

No argument there! 😊 We may be having a semantic argument over definitions in the end. In many ways, we are ALL philosophers in that we will intuitively have some kind of "philosophy" to live by, that's one's "implicit" philosophy or as Cambridge defines it: [the way that someone thinks about life and deals with it](#). I still maintain that examining one's small-p philosophy and making it an extrinsic philosophy is valuable rather than making it up as you go along. It can ground you. It can provide a broader context. It can be an eye-opening experience. But it's not necessary. One can go about one's life with one's own personal "way that [one] thinks about life and deals with it." But, over the millennia, many people have given many different ways of life a lot of thought. One doesn't have to be a Lone Ranger.