

# Carl Sagan, the 4th dimension, episode 20 of Lucretius Today, physics

**Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of August 14, 2021 at 11:41 AM**

In episode 20 of Lucretius Today there's mention of the possibility of "us being in a 'hypersphere'" and some other mathematical "possibilities" to describe our existence; among them was mentioned the comparison between "beings" that could live in two dimensions compared to us; and then, extrapolating from there, the possibility of there being a 4th dimension of reality that we could not see or understand, as the 2D beings could not see or understand our 3D world. There's a video of Carl Sagan about it here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0WjV6MmCyM&ab\\_channel=AstronomyCorner](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0WjV6MmCyM&ab_channel=AstronomyCorner)

As expected, nobody in the podcast said they considered this to be true, or that they accepted these views as valid. I just wanted to post this as an example of the type of paradoxes that may confuse people into thinking that because these mathematical definitions are valid in the realm of math they could be valid in reality automatically, which was pointed out in the show and I appreciated it. This is something I think is not pointed out often enough.

Also in the podcast, I perceived a need of most to justify that even if Epicurus got some things wrong in his physics, "he got most things right" and "it's impressive how he could explain these things", as if there had to be a balance in favor of having gotten the most things right. But there's something that bothers me about trying to say that Epicurus "had a lot of things right" when it comes to physics, as if, if he hadn't, everything else could be discarded as invalid. Ironically, I think there is something platonic about this search for the ultimate truth and most accurate description of our existence, as an ideal state of perfect knowledge; and as such, I think we should be wary of it. Mostly because we're likely to have mistakes when we extend beyond what we can experience immediately, and could suffer from founding ourselves in theories of things we may not even be able to comprehend ever, and when proven wrong or contradicted, it might conflict us.

Whereas, if the physics is seen as something that serves the purpose of giving an adequate context, or better understanding, of our immediate reality, we can accept that they can be good for a while, and then perhaps we could find out they're actually wrong, but that doesn't change our reality. What I'm saying is that Epicurus proposed some theory of physics to give a sufficiently good context to the obvious things we experience in reality, not as a foundation of everything. I'm not saying not to keep on researching and trying to learn about our environment better. I just say that we should do it as I think Epicurus did it: Either for the intrinsic joy that the research activity brings to the researcher, or to give a context that could

allow us to better understand our immediate reality and life experience, not as a way to find the ultimate and most accurate foundation of reality; as I understand it, he didn't say that his physics were the foundation of his whole philosophy, but the Canon is, but I may be wrong about this. But still, with the Canon we can be certain of many things even if the current theory of physics is proven to be wrong afterwards, because it is related to our immediate reality and life experience.

Using the Canon we can be aware that the fact is that not even us can experience an interaction with "beings" in 2D, because even a line in a paper is a 3D thing when looked at the proper scale and perspective. For us, there's no 2D in our immediate experience, as there's no 4D. I'm not saying there's no 4D in the universe, I'm not the owner of the truth, perhaps there is, but most importantly, it doesn't concern me; what I'm saying is that, in our immediate experience there is nothing that could allow us to think there is.

On line with what was talked about in the episode, there might as well be a material end point to the vacuum we now think engulfs all matter in the universe (doesn't make sense to me, but we wouldn't be able to see it anyway), and there might as well be one or many supreme beings out there, creators even, with what we would call supernatural powers, in a more complex reality that we couldn't understand, and, they may even find in the future that the model for atomic particles allows for them to propose further divisions of these particles... but the point is, even if there were, what's evident for us in our life experience is that this shouldn't concern us, because it doesn't influence our lives, or if it does we can't perceive it at all.

So, even if the vacuum is not infinite, even if matter is finite (which it could be and we could be just existing in the right place at the right time, as we now know this could be because statistically somebody had to, not because we're special beings) and it is about to be dissipated to the point of not being able to form compounds anymore, and even if we find out that probably black holes eject into our universe matter that wasn't here before, or they disappear matter into apparently "nothingness"... all of this doesn't change the fact that in our immediate experience, even though these observations (if they were observed) may contradict the theories put forth by the Epicureans, it doesn't change our immediate reality and life experience as we can perceive it with the bodies we are, in the place we are now.

One of the key takeaways I got from reading DeWitt is that Epicurus was first and foremost an observer of nature, and thus, of our immediate experiences, so it's hard for me to accept that the physics, extended to the end of the universe, and to the infinitesimal size of atomic particles, are the whole foundation of the philosophy, as I understand has been proposed sometimes. Physics help us have a common context, most of us can agree with at some point in time, that's adequate to confirm what we experience in reality.

So my guess is that he, and they, ventured into giving an explanation of the whole universe, from the atomic to the astronomical level (I say this particularly because they were using mostly logic to do so, which they themselves said could not be trusted), not because they wanted to find ultimate and unchangeable truths, but because they wanted to give this

common context, that helped most refute the possibility of us experiencing, in this reality we live in, in this Earth, the things that we, after observation can be sure that are impossible (like having external invisible forces influencing our lives and having things appearing or disappearing to and out of nowhere), and thus, carry on to more important things, like learning how to enjoy life.

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## Post by “Cassius” of August 14, 2021 at 1:28 PM

Thanks for the very thoughtful post. I haven't had time to watch the video yet, but I want to make a couple of comments. I'm not prepared with time enough to write lengthy response but I want to lay out what I think are the basics:

### [Quote from camotero](#)

But there's something that bothers me about trying to say that Epicurus "had a lot of things right" when it comes to physics, as if, if he hadn't, everything else could be discarded as invalid.

I think when we summarize by saying that we think Epicurus "had a lot of things right" we're really saying that we think he had "the important things" right -- such that the universe runs on natural principles and is not subject to supernatural oversight. In the end, I think that is a conclusion based on a combination of physics observations and choices made in epistemology, which is probably why Laertius says that the Epicureans tended to combine the discussion of the two, as Lucretius does.

So yes I would maintain that there are things that are "essential" that he got right in his physics, that are the essential foundation of the rest, and then there are many other things that are less important, most of which he included under the heading of "we don't have enough information to know which answer is right and all we need is a set of alternatives that provide options for us to consider that are natural"

I am in agreement with you that a search for a totally consistent and comprehensive set of physics propositions, and I think Epicurus says that himself as well, especially in the passage (Herodotus? Pythocles?) where he says that what is needed is not a comprehensive theory of everything but to live happily.

However to bring that point back in a full circle, he could reach the conclusion that what is needed is to live happily ONLY because his physics and epistemology convinced him that there is no life after death to be concerned about reward/punishment, or supernatural gods to be

concerned about obeying.

[Quote from camotero](#)

as I understand it, he didn't say that his physics were the foundation of his whole philosophy, but the Canon is, but I may be wrong about this.

That carries over from what I typed above, and I would say that he was confident in his epistemology NOT because it was logically sound, but because it went hand in hand and mutually supported his physics, and vice versa. The epistemology could not stand without confidence in a physics which helps us explain how the senses work, and of course our physics could not stand without our understanding and having confidence in the sense. The two are mutually supporting and both essential. The ethics follows from both together, in my view of Epicurus.

[Quote from camotero](#)

the things that we, after observation can be sure that are impossible (like having external invisible forces influencing our lives and having things appearing or disappearing to and out of nowhere),

And that's where we end up together, and our difference may only be that you seem to believe that it is self-evidently correct to take the position that "after observation we can be sure" that certain things are "impossible" without a grounding in BOTH the physics and the epistemology. I would say yes that is the conclusion, but ONLY because we have confidence in our epistemology AND our physics. I think Epicurus would say that without that confidence in both we can NEVER be sure of our positions, thus we will always be plagued with significant doubts that will "by definition" keep us from enjoying the happiest life, free of the most anxieties, that we could otherwise experience.

Sorry I don't have time this moment for more.

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**Post by "Mathitis Kipouros" of August 14, 2021 at 11:14 PM**

Thanks a lot for your answer Cassius.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I am in agreement with you that a search for a totally consistent and comprehensive set of physics propositions, and I think Epicurus says that himself as well, especially in the passage (Herodotus? Pythocles?) where he says that what is needed is not a comprehensive theory of everything but to live happily.



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

However to bring that point back in a full circle, he could reach the conclusion that what is needed is to live happily ONLY because his physics and epistemology convinced him that there is no life after death to be concerned about reward/punishment, or supernatural gods to be concerned about obeying.

Well, this is something I did not touch upon (the gods), but I'm happy you brought it up; I know it's not part of the original doctrine, but I think (I'd like to learn what people would have to say about this) that there's a point of view about the gods, or god, that is not standard Epicurean, but I'd argue is not far away either.

There's people that believe in a completely benevolent god, so this belief doesn't bring them pain at all. They don't feel compelled to do stuff to gain their favor, and they do understand that these gods or god will not harm them because... that's beneath their divine status, if you will. This is a belief that gives hope to their lives. (From there, I know it could be a slippery slope into *trying to be good to gain this god's favors*, and opening the dangerous door of what this god could deem "good", but, please, bear with me, as I stated before, these are people who are not subject to this compulsion). I don't think the issue of the gods being supernatural would come to a person like this, because, unless you've been exposed to a point of view of physical/biological gods like the Epicurean ones, I don't think you've taken the time to think about whether they're material or not, you're just aware of the concept of god. But for this argument's sake, I'm not talking about supernatural gods.

What we know now about our species is not the same that we knew back in Epicurus day. We're very destructive but we're also capable of tuning into our empathy a lot more than our fellow other animals can. I'd say this is a trait that's clearly linked to evolution and correlated to consciousness. So it's hard for me to believe that an Epicurean god would not help a less evolved being if they had the opportunity and this made them feel pleasure, while this could happen completely out of our capability of noticing it. As I see it, we can be pretty good to less evolved creatures, and I'm sure most of us are. I've thrown food to a stray dog, I've saved another one that was in pain/danger, and I've changed my walking path to avoid disturbing insects or other animals. If I find a bug in my home I try to take it out without killing it. I don't do this because I want to go to "heaven", or win the favor of a higher being, but because I it

makes me feel good, to be in the presence of another being that's alive, in my vicinity, and "allowing" it to improve its condition somewhat and also to allow me to feel my empathy, to become attuned to it. I don't feel like a god, at all, 😄, but it makes me feel good because I listen to my empathy, a clear and present feeling, towards them and this feels good. So, [Epicurean gods](#), being more evolved biological entities, wouldn't hesitate, in my opinion, to do it given the opportunity, because I'm pretty sure it will be pleasurable for them too, and they would do it without us realizing their intervention, as I'm sure the dog and the bugs don't realize at all what I just did for them. I'm sure they're not living to observe us and find ways to help us all the time, though, as classic conceptualizations of god or gods could be.

I understand we have to draw a line somewhere to be able to go forward with things, and as I understand it, Epicurean Philosophy's line is drawn at a place where no involvement from the gods (material, non supernatural) is conceivable, even if it's imperceptible; but as I stated before, perhaps this view is not that-at-odds with the philosophy, and could allow other people to benefit from Epicurean Philosophy, without having to give up their belief that there are blessings of god happening to them. Please don't banish me 😄

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

That carries over from what I typed above, and I would say that he was confident in his epistemology NOT because it was logically sound, but because it went hand in hand and mutually supported his physics, and vice versa. The epistemology could not stand without confidence in a physics which helps us explain how the senses work, and of course our physics could not stand without our understanding and having confidence in the sense. The two are mutually supporting and both essential. The ethics follows from both together, in my view of Epicurus.

I can see that. Just to clarify something, and you're going to understand me from previous posts; it is speculative physics, and physics that doesn't impact our immediate reality, that I think are unnecessary now, as were unnecessary then; particularly when they had (back then) so much to clarify in more immediate physics; and now, when we have so much more to learn about us as species (psychology, pleasure, economics, etc.) that affects us directly. So I understand how it could be a prerequisite of the epistemology to have a good physics context, but it would have to be the immediate and descriptive (rather than speculative) physics, and that type of concrete and down to earth physics I think I could see as a foundation to the epistemology and the ethics.

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

our difference may only be that you seem to believe that it is self-evidently correct to take the position that "after observation we can be sure" that certain things are "impossible" without a grounding in BOTH the physics and the epistemology. I would

say yest that is the conclusion, but ONLY because we have confidence in our epistemology AND our physics.

No, perhaps I sent the wrong message unintendedly, I don't believe observation alone is enough. But I do think that many things, like free will, are so evident without the need to give more explanation, that actually trying to do so could probably fire back at you; for example, if you decide to 'enroll in the game' of "I need to have the undefeated explanation about this phenomenon" in order to be able to say it exists and it is happening (which is evident), you're very likely to find yourself frustrated, because most certainly you will not have an undefeated explanation about it; and if you base your philosophy on [blank] (something as obvious as free will), the reality is it will remain untouched, regardless of whether you were or not able to explain why and how something so obvious is indeed happening. And many more things are nowadays as evident and obvious as free will (to most people, after a certain age and education) than they probably were back then; so I guess my point is that the physics that are practical and useful are settled and pretty much allow, most basically educated people, to reach those same conclusions (of no supernatural stuff happening), allowing them to be able to jump into the parts of the philosophy that are actually more helpful to live happy lives. I'm not saying they're not important, I'm saying today's physics (in the domain that describes our immediate experience) are pretty much settled and serve their purpose to allow people to connect the dots easily when presented with this materialistic ontology. On the other hand... There's so much more to do about the Epistemology and Ethics!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 15, 2021 at 1:54 AM**

It's 2am for me and the only thing I have time to say before I fall asleep is "You're going to have to work a lot harder before it's time to consider Banishment!" :-). Now my problem is how to remember to come back here since I've flipped the "unseen" notification. I will have much more to say. 😊

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 15, 2021 at 7:43 AM**

Ok I am back!

It seems to me that in the past I've had several conversations along these lines so I'd like to try to move straight to the ultimate issues if I can -

I don't think what we're really discussing is varying views of the gods (that they exist in reality vs as ideal constructions of the human mind). We have many opinion on that here among Epicureanfriends users and I don't think we have enough evidence to choose one option as the only one that was in Epicurus' mind. In fact this might be analogous to the multiple options that he allowed in astronomical matters (as long as the options all are consistent with observable facts).

It sounds to me like what you're really arguing in the issue of gods is that we should accept that some people have views of active gods that are not destructive of and in fact beneficial to their happiness.

I think my best response to that would be to drop back and say that I think we should keep in mind the likelihood (I think a certainty) that Epicurus was aware of the need to, and constantly did, swap back and forth between talking in terms which are primarily "logical" at times, while at other times focusing on the "practical." I think he would say that doing so does not make him inconsistent but acknowledges the limits of logic (the need to always tie it to observable evidence) and the ultimate primacy of the canonical faculties given by nature.

So when you point to particular cases and say that particular people get particular hope from their particular views of a particular type of god, I believe Epicurus would say "of course that can happen." He basically says as much in his concluding remarks on agency in the letter to Menoeceus where he points to it being better to believe in myths than to succumb to hard determinism. That is the ultimate practical side of Epicurus.

But I also think that Epicurus lived in a world dominated by Platonists and the rest who identify "logic" as the way to approach these issues, and so he also took a position on the "logical best" position to take, as he seems to have done on the issue of the "greatest good / good" even while criticizing the Peripatetics for walking around harping on it uselessly.

And I think Epicurus would say that on that purely theoretical level (which I think is where you also get the best reasoning in favor of the "idealist" view of the gods) the best way for the "average" human to view the gods so as to live the theoretical happiest life with the least possible anxiety is the way he advocated -- that as a logical ideal, "gods" should be thought of in absolute terms as supremely self-sufficient and therefore not concerned about things that they have no need to be concerned about. I see that as analogous to the point which causes so much debate and (in my view) is so easy to misinterpret - that the greatest pleasure can be equated (at least in magnitude) with the absence of pain. That observation in my view is based on the logical abstraction of quantity which results from categorizing ALL experience as either pleasure or pain. In that statement I believe he is abstracting those two words "pleasure" and "pain" and expecting us to understand that those two words cover a myriad - actually unlimited - number of experiences that are each subtly different from each other and tied to their

individual facts.

So where I end up is the view that you can definitely be right that in certain contexts certain views which we might not consider to be "ideal" can be practically useful, so it would be perverse to deny that and make "the perfect the enemy of the good."

However at the same time it is important in other contexts to be able to engage with the world around you, and if you are surrounded by Platonists instead of fundamentalist Christians, you need to be able to identify in your own mind, in response to the Platonists, a logical formulation of the "best" view of religion -- at least if you decide to play their game of accepting for the sake of discussion that there is a "best" view at all.

We probably ought to have an independent discussion of whether it is ever a good idea, and if it is, in what circumstances, to engage in these logic games despite Epicurus' insistence that there is no realm of pure logic, that logic itself is not part of the canon, that the canonical faculties are themselves the standard of truth, etc.

But just like you are pointing to realities that some people do seem to profit from their "active god" religious views, there are some people who insist on being Platonists / Stoics / and idealists of all kinds, and we live in a world where in practical terms most of us cannot escape from engaging with them.

That's the main point I wanted to make. Then there is also this:

To the extent you are saying that it seems likely to you that advanced beings would take interest in lesser beings as a matter of pleasure to themselves, I think Epicurus would also say "of course" and he would point to his position on isonomia and on infinite numbers of worlds with life on them and he would say of course there are highly advanced beings who do exactly like that, just like we do ourselves, but on a far more advanced scale that would seem to most of us as being "godlike." The isonomia view would I think allow for an infinite progression / spectrum of advancement above us.

It's only when someone insists on speculating "What about the TOP level of advancement" (as if there is such a thing, which I am not sure Epicurus would say that there is) that I think it would become appropriate to discuss his views of "perfect" beings. I would expect him to say that either virtually all or actually all of the advanced god-like beings that exist in the universe are somewhere on that spectrum other than at the logical top, so to greater or lesser degrees that might well take interest in things around them.

In my mind, it is not Epicurus' views of the theories of gods that would make him reject the claim that such things as Jesus rising from the "dead" happened, or the various miracles that they claim are true did not actually happen. In my view, Epicurus would take the position that all kinds of things that we have never seen before "may" actually come to our attention, but if they do they are not "supernatural" - a logical term which is an impossibility in terms of

Epicurean reasoning.

The real persuasive objection to the claims of miracles is not the assertion of abstract logic that they "cannot" happen, but that there is no valid evidence that they do happen. Many of our technological marvels today would seem like magic to the ancient Epicureans (at least in a manner of speaking) but they would be (1) confident that the effect was not supernatural, and (2) confident that upon studying the facts long enough they would eventually be able to understand how such things were brought about naturally.

Just because we think that it is impossible for supernatural gods to exist, that doesn't mean that tomorrow our solar system isn't going to be invaded by living breathing highly-advanced aliens from another galaxy who choose to destroy the earth in an instant for some purpose of their own.

OK I have probably rambled enough but maybe some of these comments will advance the conversation.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 15, 2021 at 7:58 AM**

Possibly one of the ironies here is that even to engage in a discussion for the proposition "there is no highest good" or "there are no supernatural gods" you are necessarily entering into a playing field of abstract logic where you are accepting definitions which do not map perfectly to reality. Did Epicurus do that at times? Apparently, so as to show the way out of Platonic logic traps, but it seems the later Epicureans felt forced to do so more frequently (as cited by Torquatus) and even though they perhaps fought fiercely to maintain Epicurus' original point as well, it's easy for establishment victors to preserve only what they want to preserve.

I do think though that when "other" Epicureans went so far as to admit a fourth leg into the canon, which seems to me to have been done as an accomodation to "logic", was a fateful and fatal mistake.

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### **Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of August 17, 2021 at 8:53 AM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In fact this might be analogous to the multiple options that he allowed in astronomical matters (as long as the options all are consistent with observable facts).

I seem to recall having read something close to this, and it had to have been in this forum or in DeWitt. Something like, all the possibilities that are in line with the physics are possible until one is proved to be the right one and the others proven to be wrong? Is there a PD about this?

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

as he seems to have done on the issue of the "greatest good / good" even while criticizing the Peripatetics for walking around harping on it uselessly.

What do you mean by this? I though the greatest good was life, and the objective/end (or "telos" as DeWitt puts it) is pleasure.

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

the best way for the "average" human to view the gods so as to live the theoretical happiest life with the least possible anxiety is the way he advocated -- that as a logical ideal, "gods" should be thought of in absolute terms as supremely self-sufficient and therefore not concerned about things that they have no need to be concerned about.

The only thing that bothers me about this ideal, is that it may be looked by many as an objective in itself, instead of pleasure, justifying even the individualistic tendencies that may arise when first exposed to a philosophy like this, or, at least, an aloof position towards other's experience; like most times, for argument's sake, I'm going to an extreme, so let me explain my point of view: when you come from other philosophies/religions, where the common good is dogmatically (while being hipocritically repeated but not practiced) accepted as the greatest good, and you're exposed to a philosophy that tells you that the greatest good is life (thus, your life) and that the objetive of life is pleasure (thus, your pleasure, as it is subjective and you can't experience the other's pleasure), you get a feeling that this philosophy is a highly individualistic one.

I do understand, though, that this ideal, used properly, can allow for greater peace of mind, and evidently comes from an observation of nature, specifically us as the most advanced species we've observed, and how we relate to the other less-advances species on Earth. I'd argue that an important (arguably the most important) part of the observations that we can make out of this comparison of species is that of our ability for empathy and compassion, and the pleasure we can get out of it, which, as I understand, from what I've read, was completely missing from Epicuru's description. Any thoughts on this?

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

That observation in my view is based on the logical abstraction of quantity which results from categorizing ALL experience as either pleasure or pain. In that statement I believe he is abstracting those two words "pleasure" and "pain" and expecting us to understand that those two words cover a myriad - actually unlimited - number of experiences that are each subtly different from each other and tied to their individual facts.

I'm not sure I get what you're trying to say here. Could you please explain? I do think all experiences could be categorized as either pleasurable or painful, and I like the simplicity of that. Are you saying this is not so? I'd like to learn your point of view about this.

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

We probably ought to have an independent discussion of whether it is ever a good idea, and if it is, in what circumstances, to engage in these logic games

I have accepted the doctrine that there's no point in engagin in those kind of discussions. Unfortunately, I've done it many times; since they start from a place of ideallistic competition, they focus on winning or losing the argument, not in accepting and giving good arguments for the sake of growing and having a good experience; and thus, when you win, the other part usually feels offended, when nobody wins, it is seldom a fun experience since most people take it personally, and if the other one wins, you end up confused but probably for the wrong reasons.

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

(1) confident that the effect was not supernatural, and (2) confident that upon studying the facts long enough they would eventually be able to understand how such things were brought about naturally.

Agreed. Also agreed that physics are needed for this, and thus, foundational to the philosophy. Going back to my first argument about physics, what I meant is not that physics are not important, but rather that the specific physical explanations of Epicurus and Lucretius don't have to be right for the rest of the philosophy to be valid, especially nowadays that we have better explanations that allow us to reach these same two conclusions you mentioned.

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**Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of August 17, 2021 at 8:54 AM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I do think though that when "other" Epicureans went so far as to admit a fourth leg into the canon, which seems to me to have been done as an accomodation to "logic", was a fateful and fatal mistake.

Are there any examples or anecdotes about this?

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 17, 2021 at 9:50 AM**

I am pressed for time this morning and am no doubt going to be short in these responses. Feel free to follow up.

### [Quote from camotero](#)

Something like, all the possibilities that are in line with the physics are possible until one is proved to be the right one and the others proven to be wrong? Is there a PD about this?

This would be primarily PD 24 If you reject any single sensation, and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion, as to the appearance awaiting confirmation, and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations, as well, with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation, and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved the whole cause of doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong.

But the issue of choosing prematurely is also mentioned in Lucretius and also the letter to Pythocles. We discuss this in this week's podcast which I hope to get out soon. Here is letter to Pythocles:

### Quote

[86] We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution

of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.

[87] For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.

Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them. But when one accepts one theory and rejects another, which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry and has recourse to myth. Now we can obtain indications of what happens above from some of the phenomena on earth: for we can observe how they come to pass, though we cannot observe the phenomena in the sky: for they may be produced in several ways.

[88] Yet we must never desert the appearance of each of these phenomena, and further, as regards what is associated with it, must distinguish those things whose production in several ways is not contradicted by phenomena on earth.

#### [Quote from camotero](#)

What do you mean by this? I though the greatest good was life, and the objective/end (or "telos" as DeWitt puts it) is pleasure.

I think most of us (certainly me) think that DeWitt is being a little broad in saying that, and it is necessary to be very specific about what perspective is the "greatest good." Certainly neither pleasure nor pain has any meaning unless we are living. Does that mean that being alive is our greatest good? Sort of, from some perspectives of that word. But does that mean that when we are alive we spend every moment thinking about staying alive? No, we pursue pleasure and avoid pain, but in the context of staying alive. Those viewpoints can be fit into all sorts of word-play constructions so you have to be careful.

#### [Quote from camotero](#)

is that it may be looked by many as an objective in itself, instead of pleasure, j

I agree that NOTHING is an objective in itself other than pleasure (which assumes staying alive).

### [Quote from camotero](#)

you get a feeling that this philosophy is a highly individualistic one.

There is little doubt about that, and I think most of us here agree, that in practice Epicurean philosophy IS highly individualistic. However it also incorporates that your greatest pleasures are necessarily tied to having friends, so the goal is never "individualism for the sake of individualism" but "whatever works for the pleasure of myself and my friends (family, etc)." That is hard for some people to swallow but there is no mechanism in nature for feeling the feelings of other people other than through your personal contact with them. You can conceptualize "I love all humanity and all living things" and that's perfectly valid to derive pleasure from that. But there is no Supernatural or Natural mechanism in play that compels everyone to that point of view. There is the practical consideration that if you go around being "mean" others are likely to respond and smack you in the head. But that is a purely practical consideration and has no mechanism naturally or supernaturally to enforce it. Sometimes people we think are bad don't get smacked in the head - it is only if real people take real action to avenge the "wrongs" done on them that such punishment occurs.

### [Quote from camotero](#)

I'd argue that an important (arguably the most important) part of the observations that we can make out of this comparison of species is that of our ability for empathy and compassion, and the pleasure we can get out of it, which, as I understand, from what I've read, was completely missing from Epicuru's description.

I would not say at all that that is completely missing. He emphasized that friendship is the most important tool for securing safety and happiness (pleasure). That means we have to be to some degree cooperative. What appears to be "missing" to many people is that because Epicurus held that there are no Gods or idealistic mechanisms to enforce the extension of friendship to the whole world, Epicurus didn't choose to invent one like Plato and the rest did. He acknowledged how Nature functions and says that's "The Way Things Are."

### [Quote from camotero](#)

I'm not sure I get what you're trying to say here. Could you please explain? I do think all experiences could be categorized as either pleasurable or painful, and I like the simplicity of that. Are you saying this is not so? I'd like to learn your point of view about this.

What I am reacting to here is that some people think that Epicurus was only talking about "Bodily" pleasure (food drink sex etc). I believe it is clear that Epicurus included EVERY activity

in life, even those which we consider to be purely "mental" as experiences that generate pleasure and pain. The reason to emphasize this is that Epicureans are attacked for allegedly thinking that "their god is the belly" and that is false. Epicurus clearly stated that "mental" pleasures and pains are frequently more intense and important than "bodily" ones. (That is clearly stated in Torquatus' section in On Ends)

[Quote from camotero](#)

Unfortunately, I've done it many times; since they start from a place of ideallistic competition, they focus on winning or losing the argument,

Yes and I too think it is unavoidable. Epicurus clearly did. If you live in a world of Platonists / Stoics like we do, there's going to be no way to avoid responding to their logic games.

[Quote from camotero](#)

what I meant is not that physics are not important, but rather that the specific physical explanations of Epicurus and Lucretius don't have to be right for the rest of the philosophy to be valid, especially nowadays that we have better explanations that allow us to reach these same two conclusions you mentioned.

I would just emphasize there that the ultimate conclusions are either certainly or probably still valid. I certainly think that the ultimate conclusion is that the universe operates on natural principles (not supernatural) and that there is no human life after death. Those I put in "certain" I also personally think that the other conclusions about "infinite space" and "eternal time" and "no infinite divisibility" were also very important to Epicurus, and remain highly probable at the very least, but I certainly understand that not everyone agrees with that and it's not such an important issue to resolve immediately that we can't all work together. However anyone who admits the nose of "supernatural" or "eternal soul" under the tent is in my view simply too far outside the limits to be considered an Epicurean.

[Quote from camotero](#)

Are there any examples or anecdotes about this?

There are several references in DeWitt which discuss this, but the main two text sources that talk about the deviations are:

(1) Diogenes Laertius in discussing the number of legs of the canon, and

(2) Torquatus (in On Ends) discussing how some Epicureans (himself included) think it is necessary to prove that pleasure is the goal by abstract means

## Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 10:17 AM

Life can't be the "greatest good," otherwise, death would conversely be the "greatest bad." And [death is nothing to us](#).

Pleasure (i.e., living a pleasurable life) is the goal, telos, beginning, and end.

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## Post by “Cassius” of August 17, 2021 at 12:09 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Life can't be the "greatest good," otherwise, death would conversely be the "greatest bad." And [death is nothing to us](#).

Pleasure (i.e., living a pleasurable life) is the goal, telos, beginning, and end.

I think that is another perspective issue. Being dead is nothing to us, but losing our lives prematurely before it is necessary is a huge thing to be avoided (that gets us into the issue of how long should we seek to live.) That's a huge issue that deserves its own discussion. It is NOT a matter of indifference to me if I die tomorrow vs 20 years from now which I might reasonably hope to do given state of health, etc. So that "[Death is nothing to us](#)" line is something else that has to be parsed VERY carefully.

So I think that we have a big issue here about being very careful about defining what we mean by the "greatest good" -- and I think we have several texts that warn about that exact issue, including the Plutarch "walking around talking about...." text.

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## Post by “Cassius” of August 17, 2021 at 12:13 PM

I believe the "greatest good" discussion to be one of those things that Camotero is discussing that we seem to be unable to avoid, but which is in reality a "logic trap" that has to be approached very carefully.

My view is that Torquatus has to be viewed in that way as well -- I do not think Epicurus himself would have agreed to frame the issue the way Torquatus did without a lot of explanation, only

some of which we probably have from Torquatus.

It depends entirely on your conceptual definition of "good" as to whether there is a "greatest good" -- and there is nothing that is INTRINSICALLY desirable other than pleasure itself. Add to that issue the issue that while the word pleasure is a concept, pleasure is itself ultimately a FEELING that we all experience individually, not a concept. So the entire discussion is a minefield in which contexts can be dropped at any moment to reach an erroneous result.

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### **Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 12:46 PM**

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

there is nothing that is INTRINSICALLY desirable other than pleasure itself.

Which is the definition of the "greatest good."

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 17, 2021 at 12:52 PM**

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

Which is the definition of the "greatest good."

Well you SAY that, but I am not sure Epicurus would enthusiastically endorse that exact construction. 😊

Is that in the PDS or even the letter to Menorcius? I don't think that "greatest good" appears there, does it?

---

### **Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 1:47 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

Which is the definition of the "greatest good."

Well you SAY that, but I am not sure Epicurus would enthusiastically endorse that exact construction. 😊

Is that in the PDS or even the letter to Menorceus? I don't think that "greatest good" appears there, does it?

We need to define terms. What are we referring to in the texts when we use "the good" or "the greatest good"? Are we talking about when Epicurus only uses ταγαθον (tagathon) "the good" as it appears in the Tetrapharmakos or Fragment 67 (can't conceive of "the good" ταγαθον without...)?

Or the "primary and innate good" in the Letter to Menoikeus:

"This is why we say that pleasure is the **beginning and the end** of a **completely happy life**. For we recognize it as the **primary and innate good**, we honor it in **everything we accept or reject**, and we achieve it if we judge every good thing by the standard of how that thing affects us."

Are we referring to what Epicurus calls the telos? Cicero and Lucretius's summum bonum?

I think it might behoove is to gather every mention of each of these and their context and how they're defined. Otherwise, we're groping around in the dark.

---

## Post by "Cassius" of August 17, 2021 at 2:00 PM

I think we have Cicero's definition through Torquatus (We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else)

And that is the problem. We don't have Epicurus endorsing that specific formulation.

This formulation presumes that we have the ability to discover something that completely and accurately fulfills this definition for all times, all places, all people. I suspect rather strongly that

that is not possible. THE end? Why should we presume that there is only one? Or that it is the same for all?

---

### **Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 3:45 PM**

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

This formulation presumes that we have the ability to discover something that completely and accurately fulfills this definition for all times, all places, all people. I suspect rather strongly that that is not possible. THE end? Why should we presume that there is only one. Or that it is the same for all?

It seems to me you're conflating moral/ethical ends with instrumental or practical ends. Pleasure is THE (to use your capitalization) end to which everything points. Why are people virtuous? Because it gives them pleasure. Why do babies suckle? Because it gives them pleasure. And so on. Seeking pleasure and avoiding pain is the only thing that is "the same for all."

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of August 17, 2021 at 4:27 PM**

I agree with all that as a matter of one way of presenting the logic of stating that pleasure is the alpha and omega and all that. However in the end the logical statement comes back to the "feeling" of pleasure which is not something that can be uniformly defined for all people at all places and all times. So i think it's necessary to be very careful once you engage in this as a logical debate. Apparently Torquatus thinks that his position on this is better than that of Epicurus, which I think should not be accepted at face value.

#### Quote

Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a notion naturally implanted in our minds. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many

philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain.

And as to the issue of instrumental or practical end, which is the "greatest" end?

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### **Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 4:42 PM**

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

I agree with all that as a matter of one way of presenting the logic of stating that pleasure is the alpha and omega and all that. However in the end the logical statement comes back to the "feeling" of pleasure which is not something that can be uniformly defined for all people at all places and all times.

It's not a statement of logic. Epicurus was identifying the one thing - given to us by nature or natural selection/evolution - not gods, not God, not logic - that we could steer our own little boats by. Those feelings of pleasure and pain are the only reliable guides - not virtue, not logic. He wasn't positing a logical argument. He was pointing out what nature had provided for us. He didn't think it needed a logical proof because it was self-evident. Pleasure is "the end fixed by nature" in the Letter to Menoikeus. [PD25](#) talks about "refer each of your actions to the end prescribed by nature."

PS: This is the other quote from DL X.137 I was looking for:

#### Quote from Diogenes Laertius

..as proof that pleasure is the end [Epicurus] adduces the fact that living things, so soon as they are born, are well content with pleasure and are at enmity with pain, by the prompting of nature and apart from reason.

---

### **Post by “Godfrey” of August 17, 2021 at 7:31 PM**

The feelings are the primary and the final guides for our little boats, but like the other canonical faculties they need to be considered and evaluated to be acted upon in the most advantageous way in each given situation.

Considering and evaluating are not part of the canon but they're definitely crucial to choosing and avoiding. They just tend to mislead without the canon and are therefore useless on their own.

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### Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of August 17, 2021 at 9:08 PM

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

Life can't be the "greatest good," otherwise, death would conversely be the "greatest bad." And [death is nothing to us](#).

Pleasure (i.e., living a pleasurable life) is the goal, telos, beginning, and end.

When I read this in DeWitt, I took it not as an adjective (whose opposite would rightly be "bad") but rather as noun; as in the best thing we could ever *have*; and if we lost it, we would be losing the greatest thing we had. This doesn't imply that we should fear losing it, as long as we're certain we are giving it and will keep on giving it the best possible use towards the ultimate goal of pleasure, the thing that is *most greatly good*.

Was I interpreting this wrong?

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### Post by “Cassius” of August 17, 2021 at 9:31 PM

This conversation is driving me ever deeper to the position that Torquatus abandoned, and which Epicurus asserted, that logical proofs over the nature of pleasure are not appropriate.

And I am taking more and more the attitude that they Plutarch quote (we need to see if we can agree on a good translation) was aimed at the same target - that attempts to define a "greatest good" are intrinsically Platonic and unproductive.

Which is not a complaint Camotero but a good thing! 😊

Let's see how Don or others would respond to your question.

I am thinking this is an area, like anticipations, where DeWitt was going in the right direction but maybe did not go far enough. I think you are interpreting DeWitt's intent correctly, but I doubt his intent is fully satisfactory - there was more to be said.

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### **Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 9:36 PM**

#### [Quote from camotero](#)

Was I interpreting this wrong?

No, I don't think so. I should probably have written "Death would be the greatest evil" but even that may be overstating. But "life as the greatest good" per DeWitt doesn't strike me as helpful. It's not life per se. I think Epicurus would ask what's the kind of life you're living. Is it directed toward pleasure? Are you making choices based on moving your life in a pleasurable direction? Are you loving and practicing wisdom (ie, applying Epicurean philosophy) ?

---

### **Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 9:40 PM**

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

This conversation is driving me ever de pere to the position that Torquatus abandoned, and which Epicurus asserted, that logical proofs over the nature of pleasure are not appropriate.

That's been my position all along, especially in light of the quote from DL I just added above and here again:

#### Quote from Diogenes Laertius, X.137

as proof that pleasure is the end [Epicurus] adduces the fact that living things, so soon as they are born, are well content with pleasure and are at enmity with pain, by the prompting of nature and apart from reason.

---

## **Post by “Cassius” of August 17, 2021 at 9:48 PM**

Well you have observed correctly there that I need to be more accurate. Logical discussion over pleasure certainly seems to be something Epicurus or at least some Epicureans engaged in at times, probably to respond to Platonic logical arguments. They didn't just say "I am not going to discuss it."

But he doesn't rely ultimately on those for his ultimate proofs - he "points" to young living things, and observes sugar is sweet, and uses the canonical faculties which are not themselves something that do or can require logical proofs themselves.

So I think he does both at separate times and from separate perspectives and that we have to be dexteritous enough to follow him / them in the different contexts.

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## **Post by “Don” of August 17, 2021 at 10:20 PM**

To the best of my knowledge, Epicurus never made logical arguments for the "goodness of pleasure" but rather asserted it was self-evident and needed no proof (Tsouna, *The Ethics of Philodemus* p. 17 citing Demetrius Lacon, PHerc. 1012).

Later Epicureans, like Cicero's Torquatus character, maintained logical proofs were needed to combat the arguments of other schools.

That being said, if you know of a reference to Epicurus making logical arguments for pleasure as the goal, please share! That's not a challenge. Just a desire to learn!

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## **Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of August 17, 2021 at 11:14 PM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

No, I don't think so. I should probably have written "Death would be the greatest evil" but even that may be overstating. But "life as the greatest good" per DeWitt doesn't strike me as helpful. It's not life per se. I think Epicurus would ask what's the kind of life you're living. Is it directed toward pleasure? Are you making choices based on moving

your life in a pleasurable direction? Are you loving and practicing wisdom (ie, applying Epicurean philosophy) ?

I kindly wish too push my question again, as I believe you have the right intent in your answer, but I think you're still answering about the adjective "good" (comparing it to evil) and not "good" as a *thing* (which doesn't need comparison), which is how I understood DeWitt used it. From this point of view, life is not either good or bad, per se, but it's just something that *is*, and that we do *have* (semantically somebody would debate that you can't "have" life, but I hope is clear that I use it as in "we can take care of it, cherish it, keep it safe, and lose it"). I remember DeWitt saying "*life* is the greatest good" in contrast to "*pleasure* being the greatest good", and making the clarification that pleasure is not something you have, but that you experience, and thus, our objective/end/telos, is to experience pleasure.

As for the adjective "good", as in what is right or wrong, I think it's clear that good is pleasure and wrong is pain.

And as such, we could have a thing that is good (gives us pleasure) or bad (gives us pain), and thus, our greatest thing (life) could be a good one or a bad one.

Wow. From all the clarifications I'm going out of my way to provide, I see why [Cassius](#) says we may be falling into a logical or semantic trap, but I don't believe this is the case.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of August 18, 2021 at 4:01 AM

For a non-Greek allegorical anecdote about the good as a noun:

I recently purchased a small ceramic sculpture. One day as I was observing and thinking about it, it occurred to me that it was precious in a certain way and that it could be instructive to compare it to "the good." How would I respond to it as something "precious?" Observe it, treat it with care, contemplate it, place it somewhere that I can maximize my opportunities to appreciate it.... Considering it precious, should I stress out over damaging or losing it or maximize my pleasure regarding it? I also realized that while it may seem precious to me, to someone else it may seem like junk! (But this realization digresses from my point.)

Well, naturally I arrived at the conclusion that the best thing to do is to maximize the pleasure that I can gain from this object. In this particular case the pleasures are primarily mental: observing the object, thinking about other pieces by the sculptor and the ideas she may be working with, trying to understand how it was constructed, thinking about what it is that I enjoy about it, noticing the various textures, remembering the pleasant circumstances in which I first

encountered it, &c.... (I guess if I had a different disposition I may have concluded that it's my virtuous duty to care for it, but that's not where I ended up.)

My point is that it's possibly useful to think of the sculpture as a proxy for "life itself," and to think of my conclusion of the best thing to do as "the goal." Of course one may arrive at their own conclusions....

(For the record, the sculpture isn't all that precious but, personally, I'm enjoying it greatly.)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2021 at 6:08 AM**

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

That being said, if you know of a reference to Epicurus making logical arguments for pleasure as the goal, please share!

I don't want to get too far off track here by over-focusing on this particular point, but I personally consider PD3-4 to be a "logical" argument (dealing with the issue of the limit of pleasure, which is not particularly relevant or important unless you are dealing with Plato's logical "pleasure has no limit and therefore cannot be the greatest good" argument). Aside from PD3-4 there is no clear and obvious and prominently placed statement of the role of pleasure in the opening PDs, and that in itself is something that has always struck me as a fascinating difference between the PDs and the letter to Menorceus. If the PDs were intended to be a prioritized list of important things to remember (and I think they are) and if Epicurus considered identification of "the greatest good" to be important to us (which I don't think is true) why does the top ten not include "Pleasure is the greatest good."? At least according to Torquatus / Cicero that is what "all philosophers agree" to be the ultimate question. It appears to me that Cicero should not have included Epicurus in that list of "all philosophers".

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### **Post by “Don” of August 18, 2021 at 7:38 AM**

I have more to respond, but it won't be until this evening at least.

For now, I'd just ask, for anyone who wants to think about it: **How would you answer this question? To what does Epicurus's philosophy point? Or What is the point of Epicurus's philosophy?**

To me, that answer would be "the greatest good". I'm seeing the greatest good (is it good as in pleasing/right or good as in wares/household goods?), the goal, telos, etc as closely related if not synonymous myself.

Later.

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### **Post by "Mathitis Kipouros" of August 18, 2021 at 8:33 AM**

#### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

My point is that it's possibly useful to think of the sculpture as a proxy for "life itself," and to think of my conclusion of the best thing to do as "the goal." Of course one may arrive at their own conclusions

This is exactly what I was referring to. I really liked your post. I think you hit the nail in the head.

---

### **Post by "Mathitis Kipouros" of August 18, 2021 at 8:44 AM**

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

To what does Epicurus's philosophy point? Or What is the point of Epicurus's philosophy?

To me, that answer would be "the greatest good"

I think "the greatest good" is here being used as a platonic ideal. I think Epicurus philosophy pointed to something very material instead: Teaching how to care for the only object you can really possess (life) and how to give it the best use possible (following pleasure) while being able to resolve confusions about it (the canon).

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2021 at 8:51 AM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

Or What is the point of Epicurus's philosophy?

To me, that answer would be "the greatest good". I'm seeing the greatest good (is it good as in pleasing/right or good as in wares/household goods?), the goal, telos, etc as closely related if not synonymous myself.

Later.

Probably yesterday or the day before I would myself use exactly those words, and I may use them later today or tomorrow.

But I increasingly get the feeling that without strict qualification this approach is what Epicurus warned against, and that Godfrey is pointing the same way as Camotero who is stating the issue very well:

### [Quote from camotero](#)

I think "the greatest good" is here being used as a platonic ideal. I think Epicurus philosophy pointed to something very material instead: Teaching how to care for the only object you can really possess (life) and how to give it the best use possible (following pleasure) while being able to resolve confusions about it (the canon).

---

## **Post by “Don” of August 18, 2021 at 11:22 AM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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

Or What is the point of Epicurus's philosophy?

To me, that answer would be "the greatest good". I'm seeing the greatest good (is it good as in pleasing/right or good as in wares/household goods?), the goal, telos, etc as closely related if not synonymous myself.

Later.

Probably yesterday or the day before I would myself use exactly those words, and I may use them later today or tomorrow.

But I increasingly get the feeling that without strict qualification this approach is what Epicurus warned against, and that Godfrey is pointing the same way as Camotero who is stating the issue very well:

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I think "the greatest good" is here being used as a platonic ideal. I think Epicurus philosophy pointed to something very material instead: Teaching how to care for the only object you can really possess (life) and how to give it the best use possible (following pleasure) while being able to resolve confusions about it (the canon).

Display More

Against my better judgement, I looked at my phone. I can resist anything but temptation. Or to put that more Epicureanly, I \*choose\* to not resist temptation.

Two points, and I'm off again until this evening:

[Cassius](#) : I don't really understand your reluctance or uneasiness about "those words." Epicurus repeatedly uses telos (goal) and tagathon (the good) throughout his extant writings.

[Mathitis Kipouros](#) : I think you've hit the nail on the head with your comment. Other philosophers looked to something intangible outside of nature as "the greatest good" like Virtue. Epicurus said "No, the greatest good is right here. You can feel it." That, to me, is his point. That's why the Tetrapharmakos can say "The good (tagathon) is easy to get." By the good, I read pleasure there. It's right here in front of you. Carpe the diem .

Epicurus is taking their abstract, obtuse concepts and giving them real, tangible, natural antecedents.

All for now. Great frank conversation!!

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**Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2021 at 12:44 PM**

[Quote from Don](#)

Cassius : I don't really understand your reluctance or uneasiness about "those words." Epicurus repeatedly uses telos (goal) and tagathon (the good) throughout his extant writings.

Maybe the context of my comments is that I personally am constantly looking to the way that non-philosophers will take these formulations, and I think it is very easy to fall into phrasings that reinforce negative paradigms - such as the idea that there is one specific goal or one way of life that all people should follow. Presumably it is clear to us that we mean pleasure as a feeling and we are contrasting that with absolute systems of all types, but I am not sure that is the case even here sometime, and I feel absolutely sure it is a tremendous problem outside our hallowed walls here. 😊

The whole paradigm is set up to reinforce absolutism in many ways, and breaking through is apparently a multi-thousand-year project that seems always in danger of being squashed entirely.

So certainly the words we are discussing must be used and exchanged, but we are playing in hostile territory so swords (for the anti-Epicureans) should remain at hand! 😊

(And I do get the impression sometime that all of us would like to think that everyone in the world has everyone else's best interests at heart, but I do not think that is the case, and the texts we read from the ancient world were not written in that context either. I don't doubt but that Plato and even Cicero and no doubt many others saw their task as persuasion to their positions, so everything has a motive aspect to consider.

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## Post by “Don” of August 18, 2021 at 7:09 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

the idea that there is one specific goal or one way of life that all people should follow

Oh, I have no problem saying Epicurus did, in fact, advocate for "one specific goal" - living the most pleasurable life - and "one way of life" - follow the guides of pleasure and pain to make your life choices. Otherwise, why would he found the Garden? Why would he write so many books, letters, and epitomes? He had an agenda. Lucretius fully believed Epicurus found the best path to organize one's life otherwise he wouldn't have written those soaring prefaces to the books of his poem. Epicurus and his students and successors waged word-battles, tooth and nail, against rival schools because they felt Epicurus's teaching and his way of living were

superior to all the other alternatives. There was an "evangelist" quality to the spread of the philosophy precisely because those spreading the word felt the way of life advocated by Epicurus could help people live more fulfilling lives.

Epicurus's relativism in ethics or justice doesn't preclude him saying "Your philosophy, Plato/Aristotle/etc, will not lead to a pleasant life. Mine will!"

I'm not willing to cede the battlefield and Epicurus's own words to the enemy and play by their rules. If words like "goal" and "the good" are used by "the other side," I'm happy to redefine them with more material, tangible meanings.

Whew!! Okay, so I got that off my chest then... [steps down from soapbox, motions for next person to take the stage]

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 18, 2021 at 7:26 PM**

1 - I suspect depending on time zone Camotero is going to have a good reply!

2- it's not so much that the words themselves are the issue as much as the way that they are employed. Words too are just tools, just like the virtues! :-). Even "greatest good" can be wielded helpfully - we agree on that - but the issue of "how" I think is deeper than it appears.

If wielded in a way that implies that there is but one conceptual path to follow, as if there is magic in numbers or words as Plato would imply, then that is very damaging.

If wielded using "true philosophy" however then it's the most helpful way of explaining life. Using words to explain that words cannot suffice to show us the way is tricky business!

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### **Post by "Don" of August 18, 2021 at 8:17 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

one conceptual path to follow

Could you define "one conceptual path" in reference to what I said in the first part of the post?

## Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2021 at 8:47 PM

I used "one conceptual path" as a proxy for "one way to live" in a general everyday sense - almost in a political - cultural - social sense, because that's where I see the concepts going -- "communism, capitalism, the kind of 'system' that's usually advocated for on conceptual grounds.

---

## Post by “Don” of August 18, 2021 at 8:55 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I used "one conceptual path" as a proxy for "one way to live" in a general everyday sense - almost in a political - cultural - social sense, because that's where I see the concepts going -- "communism, capitalism, the kind of 'system' that's usually advocated for on conceptual grounds.

So, do you agree or not with my assertion that:

### [Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus did, in fact, advocate for "one specific goal" - living the most pleasurable life - and "one way of life" - follow the guides of pleasure and pain to make your life choices.

---

## Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2021 at 9:57 PM

I agree that that formulation is correct and useful in some contexts 😊 I think in other contexts the point would have to be stated more explicitly in order to communicate with the audience and especially to affirm that what is included in "pleasure" is extremely broad.

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## Post by “Don” of August 19, 2021 at 8:01 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

what is included in "pleasure" is extremely broad.

[Note: This turned into more of a personal statement than a direct response to this thread in the composing. I may end up moving it to my wall, but for now, here it is.]

It may be "extremely broad" but it's not limitless. From my reading, Epicurus's philosophy (as primarily transmitted to us through his writings, Lucretius, and Philodemus)\* is one of rigorous personal responsibility for one's choices and a pursuit of the "health of the body and the serenity of the mind — since that is the goal of a completely blessed life." (Letter to Menoikeus) While it is true there are \*numerous\* personal pleasurable paths to this goal, the ancient Epicurean writers didn't shy away from discussing the "vices" that would make it difficult if not impossible to arrive at that goal. The teachers of the Garden didn't hesitate to engage their students in frank speech to "correct" their actions. It wasn't a loosey-goosey all-things-to-all-people, anything-goes, do-it-if-it-feels-good philosophy. That is more Cyrenaic than Epicurean. It's also not Platonic idealism to say some actions will generally lead to more pleasurable outcomes than others. Waffling on or downplaying some of the guardrails or boundary stones put in place by Epicurus does a disservice to the comprehensive nature of his philosophy.

That said, Epicurus doesn't give moral edicts like "no alcohol" or "no pork" or "no lying". He just said don't talk drivell when you drink, enjoy luxurious food if it is available, and no problem lying to protect your friends. The philosophy stressed the contextual nature of justice and ethics, but it also addressed the practical and expected outcomes of some of those contexts. If you drink too much for too long, you are responsible for your headache. If you are a glutton at dinner, you are responsible for your painful indigestion. If you're caught lying, you're responsible if you get caught. And Epicurus didn't shy away from calling out the negative consequences of certain actions and beliefs. The philosophy provides a more effective and practical way to live than many/most/all(?) of the alternatives, and Epicurus pointed the way without all the supernatural mumbo-jumbo.

\*On sources: I'm generally distrustful of Cicero, a little more trusting of Seneca, and downright apprehensive about using the early Christian writers when they discuss Epicurus's philosophy, but we have no choice but to use them. That's why I only listed the three avowed Epicureans in the list above.

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 19, 2021 at 8:49 AM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

On sources: I'm generally distrustful of Cicero,

I think that distrust will serve you well, and he's the one who most clearly wrapped Epicurus's view of pleasure into the formal "greatest good" formula, pretty much admitting even as he was doing it that such an approach was not sanctioned by Epicurus himself.

This is a pretty damning statement from my point of view, in its lack of confidence and his affirmative reliance on "elaborate and reasoned argument" and especially "abstruse theoretical discussion." (Of course as always I wish we had time to parse the Latin!)

### Quote

Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain.

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## Post by "Cassius" of August 19, 2021 at 8:52 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

a little more trusting of Seneca

At least Seneca was not a lawyer -- you never can trust those lawyers you know! 😊

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## Post by "Joshua" of August 20, 2021 at 11:55 PM

I'm coming late to this thread, so there will probably be some overlap. But I think I have a novel approach.

Don asked the question (if I'm summarizing fairly) whether the primary 'end' of life can ever be described as other than the highest good.

First, a quote from Tony Kushner's excellent script in the film *Lincoln*:

Quote

Thaddeus Stevens:

You know that the inner compass that should direct the soul toward justice has ossified in white men and women, North and South, unto utter uselessness through tolerating the evil of slavery.

Lincoln:

A compass, I learnt when I was surveying, it'll point you True North from where you are standing, but it's got no advice about the swamps and deserts and chasms you'll encounter along the way. If in pursuit of your destination you plunge ahead, heedless of obstacles, and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp, what's the use of knowing True North?

Now, that quote has problems (ahem...True North?), but the analogy of the compass doesn't seem half bad here.

An Epicurean might well say that the inner compass furnished by nature will-not *should*, but *will*-direct the soul toward pleasure. The compass is not normative, it is descriptive—even the inner compass of infants can be inferred to point toward pleasure.

If an individual finds themselves repeatedly veering toward pain and anxiety, it is not because their compass doesn't work—it is because they are ignoring it, or have conditioned themselves to use it improperly, or they've been given misleading directions or a faulty map (for example, they've been raised to understand that "real pleasure" is in following Christ, or whatever). What they need is not a moral chastising, but simply better training. They need to consult their compass, not someone else's poor directions.

The direction of pain isn't evil, or the "greatest bad", any more than South is bad. But it's not the direction we're driven toward by instinct, and upon reflection we'll probably find it's not the direction we really want to be going anyway. Nature has not furnished us a compass that points toward pain.

Even in consulting our compass, furnished by nature to point toward pleasure, we won't always be able to travel there in a straight line. Sometimes we have to traverse in the direction of pain to find a route that goes ultimately toward pleasure; a route that answers the cry of the inner compass.

So perhaps instead of saying "life is the highest good", or "pleasure is the highest good in life", we should be saying "pleasure is the magnetic North of life's compass".

## **Post by “Joshua” of August 21, 2021 at 12:26 AM**

The closest I can come to this analogy in the texts is Vatican Sayings 17 (Peter Saint-Andre translation):

### Quote

"It is not the young man who is most happy, but the old man who has lived beautifully; for despite being at his very peak the young man stumbles around as if he were of many minds, whereas the old man has settled into old age as if in a harbor, secure in his gratitude for the good things he was once unsure of."

The old man followed the compass furnished by nature, directed toward pleasure, through the whole of his life. The young man is still fumbling over a cluttered desk of conflicting charts, inaccurate log-books, wild rumors and legends of monsters, and on and on.

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## **Post by “Godfrey” of August 21, 2021 at 1:27 AM**

Joshua I like the compass analogy, but thinking about it further I have some reservations. The compass can show us where north is, but most often our goal isn't actually to travel north. So it's a reference, but pleasure is more properly a direct guide. I think this is one reason why True North has a troublesome Platonic feel.

As for the old man, it's not so much that he's followed the guide, or compass, of pleasure for his whole life. Speaking from my experience it's more a matter of learning from a series of mistakes to pay attention to the guide. Using another compass analogy: just as a compass wavers back and forth before settling on north, a young person is still wavering in search of the target but the old person has finished wavering and settled onto the target.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2021 at 5:38 AM**

I think I understand Godfrey's reservations, so that has to be part of explanation of the analogy, but I too really like the compass analogy, not only that it just "is" (regardless of should) but that it doesn't tell you anything about the hazards you'll have to circumnavigate along the way.

Ok this was not actually said by Lincoln in real life? I hope then we will eventually find some real person to attribute it to because it is a really good analogy to our use of pleasure as the guide but explaining why sometimes we don't always go there directly.

We can both flesh that out and also consider if there are other similar analogies. Navigating by the stars?

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**Post by “Don” of August 21, 2021 at 7:37 AM**

I like the compass metaphor a lot. I'd be nice to find a "real" quote from someone. Are there any North Star/sailing quotes out there anywhere.