

# **Article by Voorhoeve: Epicurus on Pleasure, A Complete Life, and Death: A Defense**

**Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2022 at 9:09 AM**

This looks to be a promising article from the title. I haven't had time to read but might be worth discussing. Without reading further I am not sure what to think about the "exercising our rational capabilities" comment (especially since this was presented in an Aristotle group) but I do like even at first glance the "establishing control over our lives."

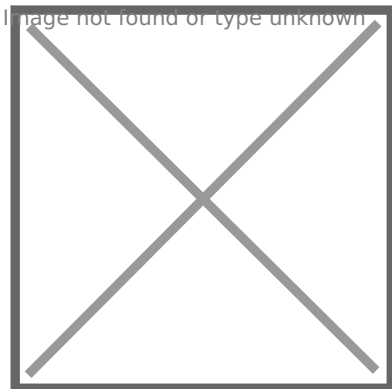
## VIII—EPICURUS ON PLEASURE, A COMPLETE LIFE, AND DEATH: A DEFENCE

ALEX VOORHOEVE

Epicurus argued that the good life is the pleasurable life. He also argued that ‘death is nothing to us’. These claims appear in tension. For if pleasure is good, then it seems that death is bad when it deprives us of deeply enjoyable time alive. Here, I offer an Epicurean view of pleasure and the complete life which dissolves this tension. This view is, I contend, more appealing than critics of Epicureanism have allowed, in part because it assigns higher value to pleasures that we produce by exercising our rational capacities and by establishing control over our lives.

### I

*Introduction.* In his *Letter to Menoecus* (LM) and several fragmentary remains of his writings, Epicurus famously gives a hedonistic account of the good life. He posits that pleasure, in itself, is always



[Epicurus on Pleasure, a Complete Life, and Death: A Defence](#)

Epicurus argued that the good life is the pleasurable life. He also argued that "death is nothing to us". These claims appear in tension. For if...  
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If this is worthwhile we'll add it to the "files" section.

NOTE: I have now read it all, and I have presented lots of criticisms of it below, but it is a very good article for focusing on the issues involved in viewing Epicurus' goal as "Tranquility."

**Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2022 at 9:20 AM**

...not comparatively bad for us even when continued existence would be maximally pleasurable. In a nutshell: on the Epicurean view I shall propose, an Epicurean sage's life is complete once they have attained the supremely pleasurable state, so that more time alive in this state (rather than dying) would not make their life as a whole better. On this view, therefore, being deprived by death of more such pleasurable time does not make the sage's death bad for them.

I don't buy this, and *ONCE AGAIN* I think the problem is we're getting tripped up by logical games about "good" and "bad" and the "greatest good" and so forth.

Why is it a problem to hold both, at the same time, that:

(1) the state of being dead is nothing to fear in itself, because it causes us no pain, because "we" are not there to experience it,

AND

(2) the state of being alive is desirable, as it is our only our chance to experience pleasure, so therefore we want to live as long as we can experience enough pleasure to make the pains of growing older worthwhile.

I see nothing contradictory between those two, and in the letter to Menoeceus Epicurus said:

Quote  
And he who counsels the young man to live well, but the old man to make a good end, is foolish, not merely because of the desirability of life, but also because it is the same training which teaches to live well and to die well. Yet much worse still is the man who

says it is good not to be born but 'once born make haste to pass the gates of Death'. For if he says this from conviction why does he not pass away out of life? For it is open to him to do so, if he had firmly made up his mind to this. But if he speaks in jest, his words are idle among men who cannot receive them.

So my view is that Epicurus held BOTH, at the same time, without contradiction, that:

(1) the state of being dead is nothing to fear in itself, because it causes us no pain, because "we" are not there to experience it, AND

(2) the state of being alive is desirable, as it is our only our chance to experience pleasure, so therefore we want to live as long as we can experience enough pleasure to make the pains of growing older worthwhile.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2022 at 9:22 AM**

If successful, my argument will refute the common charge that a central Epicurean argument is invalid. Of course, a further question is whether we should accept the view of the good life on which the valid Epicurean argument relies. While I shall not offer a full assessment of this view, I shall argue that the Epicurean good life is more appealing than critics have allowed. For it involves not only freedom from the fear of death, but also deep enjoyment, significant achievements of ethical and theoretical reasoning, as well as a high degree of control over one's life. Moreover, it is compatible with genuine concern for others—in particular, for fellow Epicureans.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2022 at 9:26 AM**

I have never heard of this clip from Clement of Alexandria but I now want to find it because I think it helps illustrate the issue very well:

These claims, and especially the assertion that the greatest pleasure involves nothing more than the removal of all pain (by which Epicurus meant all bodily discomfort and mental distress) have struck commentators as implausible, even bizarre. For example, the Cyrenaics (adherents of a contemporaneous, rival school of hedonistic philosophy) are reported to have scoffed that Epicurus apparently believed that pleasure is maximized when one attains 'the condition of a dead man' ([Clement of Alexandria 2010](#), bk. 2, ch. 21). Cicero, meanwhile, accused the 'strict, austere' Epicurus of outright inconsistency, in first setting us a goal (pleasure) that 'turns out not to be worth seeking', since, according to the first quoted passage, 'we have no need of it so long as we are free from pain!' ([Cicero 2004](#), 2.29). Closer to the present, [Julia Annas \(1987, p. 6\)](#) remarks that the mere absence of pain and distress are 'nobody's idea of how to maximize pleasure'.

Julia Annas isn't someone recognizable to quote to others, but she's right too.

Cicero's quote isn't quite as clear, but it's usable too.

All are good quotes to use against someone (maybe even the author of this article?) who wants to posit "Absence of pain" as Epicurus' complete statement of the best life.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2022 at 9:29 AM**

Yep, he's a Tranquilist, and suggests that the best way to live a pleasurable life is to give up conventional ideas of pleasure (that way you won't worry if you aren't achieving pleasure!). Not surprising to see him starting to quote Nussbaum.

such as is judged to be very small.

What would a person's outlook and situation have to be to make this belief in their near-invulnerability justifiable? For Epicurus, a key source of vulnerability lies in our desires: the thwarting of an important, strongly held desire will be perceived as an evil, and the thought that such a desire is sufficiently likely to be thwarted will cause us distress.<sup>2</sup> But we can, he proposes, greatly limit the likelihood of this perceived evil by limiting our desires and eliminating those false beliefs which cause us distress (see the excerpts from *KD* and *Vatican Sayings* [VS] in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 115–16, 150; *Fragments* [F] 74 in Epicurus 1993, p. 100; and Nussbaum 1994, pp. 104–5).

Hard to state Tranquillism more clearly than this (page 2 of the article)

In sum, a key element of Epicurus' strategy for acquiring a justified belief in one's near-invulnerability is to confine one's wants to natural and necessary desires and those among the natural and unnecessary desires that, given one's circumstances, have a high chance of not being frustrated.

So he (the writer) and Nussbaum, even though both are into tranquility and the natural and necessary division, cannot even agree among themselves as to what "empty" means. More evidence (to me) that the word "empty" is clear mainly in describing the usefulness of the empty analysis itself (for which I do not blame Epicurus, but these writers who think this word makes sense without more clear explanation of what is being discussed).

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<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum's (1994, p. 111) understanding of the categories of 'natural' and 'empty' is that they are mutually exclusive, because the latter are based on false belief or corrupted acculturation, while the former are based on neither of these. But this interpretation conflicts with Epicurus' claim that a natural and unnecessary desire *may also be empty because based on false belief*, if it is held too passionately: 'Whenever intense passion is present in natural desires which do not lead to pain if they are unfulfilled, these have their origin in empty opinion' (KD 30, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115). I therefore propose that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Rather, I assume that for a desire to be 'empty', it must involve false belief or corrupted acculturation, whereas a natural desire need not be—but *may* be—based on either of these. So, for example, one's desire for finery is natural and unnecessary because one can desire such clothing, without false belief, as merely a lovely way of being clothed. But one can also have this desire out of the opinion that it simply will not do to be seen in anything other than 'the best' or 'the latest fashion' (which, in Epicurus' view, would be a false belief, so that the desire would then be natural, unnecessary and empty).

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**Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2022 at 9:42 AM**

Combining these ideas with Epicurus' aforementioned categorization of desires into natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, and empty, one can say that the Epicurean strategy for becoming free from anxiety about the possible frustration of one's important desires has two prongs.

The first prong is carefully crafting and pruning one's desires, in part through the process of ridding oneself of false beliefs about the universe and the good life. This involves limiting one's desires to the natural and necessary ones, along with a circumscribed set of natural and unnecessary desires. Moreover, it involves shaping one's future-oriented, natural desires so that one's continued existence does not contribute substantially to their not being thwarted.

The second prong is to arrange one's circumstances so that one's remaining desires are unlikely to be frustrated. Epicurus believed that under moderately fortunate social and economic circumstances (a society with a substantial degree of stability, rule of law, respect for basic rights over one's body and mind, as well as a basic level of economic development), one can achieve justified confidence in the satisfaction of one's properly limited desires (*LM 130*, in [Long and Sedley 1987](#), p. 114). Practically speaking, for Epicurus, this involved partial social withdrawal by avoiding engagement in politics and by moving to the edge of town to live simply and securely in the company of fellow Epicureans.

Epicurus believed that pursuing the outlined two-pronged strategy would establish the practically necessary and sufficient conditions for freedom from pain and anxiety. In this paper, I shall grant this

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And if you accept the view that "freedom from pain and anxiety" was Epicurus' view of how to live life, then indeed you'll spend your time limiting your desires and withdrawing from society.

On the other hand what Epicurus did was pursue his desire for pleasure and happiness through the study of nature and the spreadings of his philosophy through constant controversy against other schools, and to live out his life pleurably among many friends (with courtesans and slaves and multiple houses and apparent material well-being) close to the very center of an Athens that was filled with people who despised his philosophy.

So I think Epicurus would reject this author's characterizations of what Epicurus taught, and I think "we" should too. Which doesn't mean there's not a lot to learn from this article, because by talking about it we get a better focus on the issues.

Second, as [Gisela Striker \(1993, pp. 16–17\)](#) points out, in the tranquil state, because one feels secure and is untroubled, one can immerse oneself in one’s experiences and wholly engage with one’s activities. Now, for an Epicurean, these activities will involve seeking (almost always successfully) to satisfy one’s natural desires for food, company, engagement with beauty, philosophy, and so on. As a consequence, one’s experiences and activities will be enjoyable: eating a piece of cheese, a conversation with a friend, the sight of a beautiful sky, and thinking through a philosophical argument will each bring unmitigated pleasure, because one can become engrossed in them without fear, anxiety, or the distractions generated by one’s unmet needs or a sense of frustration. This observation of Striker’s is important. Famously, Epicurus distinguished so-called *katastematic* (or

By all means, sir Tranquilst! Let's shut down this online forum, forget looking for Epicurean friends, forget taking action to secure our lives and our friends lives, and let's just go "eat a piece of cheese," " have a conversation with a friend," and "look at a beautiful sky." And if we do bother ourselves with philosophical (or related religious) issues, let's just "think them through" without caring whether we help our friends or anyone else who might be caught up in anxiety and distress because of those issues.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2022 at 9:57 AM**

Not surprising he cites Warren, and not surprising that he tends toward the conclusion that the Epicurean, once he has become a tranquil sage, has no motive to regard death as a "comparative evil." This is ambiguous, but I can't agree with it because it seems clear that Epicurus saw no contradiction in holding that state of being dead is not painful, but, at the same time, it is undesirable to suffer an early death.

My proposal is, then, that Epicurus takes those pleasures to be 'greatest' that are constitutive of a best and complete life (see [Warren 2004](#), pp. 130–5). Indeed, the pleasures of near-invulnerability and the notion of a complete life are intimately connected. For, as we have seen, a person who enjoys Epicurean peace of mind cannot have strong, central desires that they believe are likely to be thwarted by death. It is therefore a precondition for attaining and maintaining tranquillity that one believes that there is no more than a low chance that death will make one's life as a whole worse than it otherwise would have been. One part of the Epicurean strategy for meeting this condition is to structure one's aims so that,

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once one has become a tranquil sage, one has no motive to regard death as a comparative evil. This involves limiting one's future-oriented desires to those things for which one's continued survival

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### Post by "Cassius" of March 4, 2022 at 10:02 AM

Ok, this is his conclusion, and I pretty much wholeheartedly reject it. The word "pleasure" is mentioned but once and then in the context of "The pleasures of Tranquility." This is Tranquillism, not - in my view - what Epicurus taught.

picure, but also as recognizably good, at least in important respects.

In sum, the view outlined is as follows.

*Epicurean good and complete life:* Through theoretical and ethical reasoning (which helps one come to a more accurate picture of reality and of the good life), through wise shaping of one's character, and through prudent choices regarding one's relationships and circumstances, one renders oneself nearly invulnerable and attains the pleasures of tranquility. Once the tranquil state is achieved, more time in this state does not make one's life any better than it would be if one died after a shorter period in this state, because one desires life in this state only conditionally. In this sense, one's life is complete upon attaining the tranquil state. Nonetheless, life in this state is good and welcome, since it is enjoyable and satisfies one's conditional desire to live in that state rather than with anxiety or in pain.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2022 at 10:06 AM**

To end on a high note, this is a good quote from Philodemus which he includes near the end of the discussion. I would say Philodemus has a much better grasp of the teachings than does this writer:

example, the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara writes:

<sup>11</sup> For reasons outlined in [Burri 2019](#), it might also be bad for them because it thwarts their agency.

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[I]t is reasonable for this reason [viz., in order to attain the Epicurean complete life] to try to live for as long as possible and to think that for this reason some young people die miserably. For it is the mark of a man of understanding to desire to live for a certain period of time in order to fulfil the innate and natural desires and grasp the whole of the most appropriate way of life possible. As a result, being satisfied with goods and rejecting every disturbance which desires cause, he comes upon tranquillity. (Philodemus, *De Morte* [DM] XIII.36–XIV.14, in [Warren 2004](#), p. 149)<sup>12</sup>

In sum, on the view proposed here, attaining insight and independence from fortune, and tasting the pleasures of invulnerability all provide Epicureans with a motivation to live (indeed, to keep going in the face of difficulties). It is only Epicureans who have accomplished these aims who can invariably face death with equanimity.

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**Post by “Don” of March 4, 2022 at 1:55 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say Philodemus has a much better grasp of the teachings than does this writer

Is that an endorsement of Philodemus? 😊

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2420-article-by-voorhoeve-epicurus-on-pleasure-a-complete-life-and-death-a-defense/>

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### Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2022 at 2:22 PM

Yes! Along with my standard caution that if what he says doesn't track with the main body of the work, be cautious! But I do think that most of the time what can reliably be reconstructed DOES track with the rest.

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### Post by “Kalosyni” of March 4, 2022 at 2:32 PM

I haven't read the full article from the first post, but just the excerpts shown. This thread brings up a lots of good issues, and good contrasts:

I still believe that Epicureanism can be understood and applied in two ways, according to one's disposition:

1) pleasure (and pain) as guiding choice and avoidance, and living a full social lifestyle, from an extroverted disposition and a physically visceral experience.

2) pleasure (and pain) as guiding choice and avoidance, and living a quiet and reserved lifestyle, from an introverted disposition and a mentally rich experience.

So how you choose to live most pleasantly is coming from your in-born nature (or nurtured) disposition.

Also, there are some of us who have come through early life trauma, and so we need a more "therapeutic" approach -- this means that without a certain amount of tranquility we will feel too troubled to fully experience pleasure. Also, if we are confronted by unkind, or anxious, troubled people, then that can pull us down. So it depends on circumstances. And we need support from a gentle and loving Epicurean community.

I will need to re-read various posts above again, and may say more 😊

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### Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2022 at 3:04 PM

Quote from [Kalosyni](#)

1) pleasure (and pain) as guiding choice and avoidance, and living a full social lifestyle, from an extroverted disposition and a physically visceral experience.

2) pleasure (and pain) as guiding choice and avoidance, and living a quiet and reserved lifestyle, from an introverted disposition and a mentally rich experience.

So how you choose to live most pleasantly is coming from your in-born nature (or nurtured) disposition.

Yes - that's always a major point. Different people have different circumstances, and different immediate needs and wants.

Sometimes you're in a "defensive" position and need to focus on getting rid of pain; sometimes you're in a more "offensive" position when your life is pretty much in order, and you can afford to be more aggressive in pursuing specific pleasures you'd like to pursue.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach that applies to everyone, everywhere, all the time. If you're "sick" by all means get treatment; if you're healthy, by all means go skydiving if that's what you'd like to do.

How's this for a "chess" analogy?

When you're "sick" and you are under attack from specific pains, you pretty much have your chessboard laid out for you. You are close to being in checkmate and you have to focus immediately on the response to the attack.

When you're "healthy" you still have a chessboard, because life doesn't have unlimited options even for the most rich and most powerful, but you're more like at the opening of the game, with both sides equally equipped, and you have the first move -- you can choose many different options, and it's up to you to decide among them.