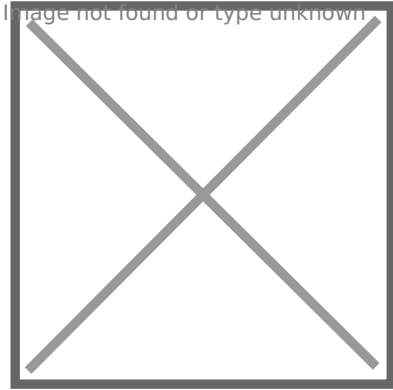


# EPICURUS ON PLEASURE, A COMPLETE LIFE, AND DEATH: A DEFENCE - ALEX VOORHOEVE

Post by "Don" of July 27, 2022 at 6:51 AM



[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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Has this been shared before?

In light of the recent threads on desires, I thought this has some interesting takes. I haven't finished reading the entire paper/chapter but did see statements like this:

*Now, with regard to such natural and unnecessary desires, Epicurus' recommendations seem to have been as follows. So long as these desires are not based on false belief (say, the belief that one simply could not be happy without finery, when in fact one could adapt perfectly well to going about in simple clothes), and so long as one could be sufficiently confident that one would always be able to satisfy them without causing pain or distress, there is no objection to developing them, maintaining them, or seeking to satisfy them.*

That to me is at least a step in the right direction.

And I have no qualms about the author's mention of "tranquility." He's not saying that is the only thing, and from all I read Epicurus stressed that we need a calm peaceful mind and a healthy body if we are to lead a pleasurable life.

Now, I need to finish reading...

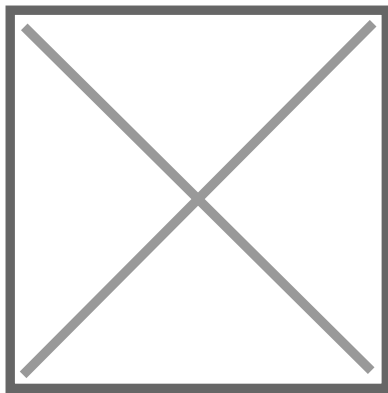
## Post by “Don” of July 27, 2022 at 7:58 AM

Okay, I think the author raised some interesting points. I don't agree with all his conclusions, naturally, but at least he took some opinions that are a bit outside the mainstream ones.

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## Post by “Don” of July 27, 2022 at 8:14 AM

For reference, here's the author's follow-up paper:



### [The Pleasures of Tranquillity](#)

Epicurus posited that the best life involves the greatest pleasures. He also argued that it involves attaining tranquillity. Commentators from Aristippus of...

[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2022 at 11:29 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

That to me is at least a step in the right direction.

Yes I agree it is. On second read of the excerpt I was a little less impressed because he said "without causing pain or distress" because that's the slope to "No no no don't accept ANY pain that isn't absolutely necessary" which conflicts with the view that we sometime choose pain for a greater pleasure. This is the formulation that, if adopted literally, keeps us tied to the cave or

just outside it.

But the part about the issue being the mistaken view that "we can't live without it" - that is indeed an interesting way to look at it and does present some good talking points. Surely it's a big mistake to think that you can't live without massive power or massive fame or without living forever. I do like that as a point to avoid and be clear about.

I say all this based just on the excerpt - I will try to read the rest as soon as I can.

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## **Post by “Don” of July 27, 2022 at 11:29 PM**

From the conclusion of the 2nd paper.

This seems to me not a bad argument for the importance of tranquility (ataraxia) in an Epicurean life. It's NOT a tranquility of living in a cave. It is an unassailable position from which to experience all the "pleasures of daily life in their most vivid form." It is a perspective on life. It is acquired from a right understanding of nature and our place in it. It is a tranquility that makes us self-reliant in the face of adversity. It is the tranquility that allows us to understand death truly is nothing to us.

As I said, I don't agree with all the author's points, but I find his support and reasons for tranquility refreshing in the face of most authors simply asserting a "tranquility is the only goal by itself" thesis. This author gives more of a why.

*First, as argued in Section 2, its (the tranquil life's) joys are varied and include the pleasures of daily life in their most vivid form.*

*Second, Epicureanism is based on the idea that lives that are not tranquil are typically unhappy: due to false religious beliefs, fear of death, and wanting more than they can be confident of securing, most ordinary people are beset with worry.*

*Third, Epicureans hold that the pleasures of tranquillity are valuable because they are produced by inquiry into nature and the best way to live, by crafting our desires accordingly, and by living so that these desires are unlikely to be thwarted. As such, they are an achievement of reason, and one that, as we have seen, leaves luck only a modest role in shaping our lives. The Epicurean tranquil life is therefore autonomous, in the sense that it involves being guided by our reasoned view of the world and our conception of the good and accomplishing what we set out to achieve.*

*Finally, as Epicurus claims in the passage just quoted from Key Doctrines 20-1, once we have attained tranquillity, our lives are complete. After all, tranquillity is meant to be attainable even*

*when death is imminent. Death must therefore not thwart any strongly held desires of the serene Epicurean. Once we have attained peace of mind, the very desire to remain serene must therefore be a purely conditional desire. That is, as good Epicureans, once we have attained tranquillity, we will want to spend any further time alive in this condition, but we will not want to stay alive in order to remain in it. If we then make the further assumption that something can be bad for a thoughtful, informed adult only if it frustrates a desire of theirs, then it follows that, once we have attained peace of mind through sagacious means, death will not be bad for us. A long time alive in a tranquil state will be welcome—because better than a life of misery—but it will not improve our lives over living a shorter time continuously in the tranquil state before dying. As the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus put it: “The one who understands, having grasped that he is capable of achieving everything sufficient for the good life, immediately and for the rest of his life walks*

*about already ready for burial, and enjoys the single day as if it were an eternity” (De Morte XXXVIII.14-19 in Warren 2004, p. 152).*

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of July 29, 2022 at 8:06 AM**

I definitely want to read these articles -- they are now on my ["to-do list"](#)! 😊

### [Quote from Don](#)

once we have attained tranquillity, our lives are complete. After all, tranquillity is meant to be attainable even when death is imminent.

I have to say, I am not sure I agree with this.

When death is imminent then yes I agree with the need for tranquillity.

Yet, when death is not imminent, there is more than tranquillity needed for a complete life. There was a moment in which I had a peak experience, in the past -- it was a state of pure bliss, and it was at that moment that I felt my life was complete. It was a completely "safe" experience but I wouldn't say it was "tranquil" one bit because it was active and in motion -- it was a active and ecstatic experience.

### [Quote from Don](#)

As the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus put it: “The one who understands, having grasped that he is capable of achieving everything sufficient for the good life,

immediately and for the rest of his life walks

about already ready for burial, and enjoys the single day as if it were an eternity" (De Morte XXXVIII.14-19 in Warren 2004, p. 152).

This is interesting, as it almost seems like a state of "enlightenment" -- I think that the question here is what is the "good life"? What does the "good life" look like or entail?

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### Post by "Cassius" of July 29, 2022 at 12:06 PM



Quote from Don

once we have attained tranquillity, our lives are complete. After all, tranquillity is meant to be attainable even when death is imminent.

I have to say, I am not sure I agree with this.

I would say that the entire question of having a "complete" life is troublesome. I've probably used that phrasing but I'm not sure how much sense it really makes, and referring to a life as "complete" or "less than complete" smacks of a more absolutist attitude than I would expect Epicurus to take.

I'm ok with words like "full" and "pure" to the extent that they refer to quantities that are 100% of the respective issue. But "complete" (at least some of the modern interpretations of it) seems to go beyond that, and imply a certain list of activities that everyone should experience in order to call their lives "complete." And I doubt Epicurus would sanction that.

Don do you have thoughts on wording that might bear on "complete"?

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### Post by "Don" of July 29, 2022 at 12:38 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I have to say, I am not sure I agree with this.

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Yet, when death is not imminent, there is more than tranquility needed for a complete life. There was a moment in which I had a peak experience, in the past -- it was a state of pure bliss, and it was at that moment that I felt my life was complete. It was a completely "safe" experience but I wouldn't say it was "tranquil" one bit because it was active and in motion -- it was a active and ecstatic experience.

I found this line from the 2nd papers introduction interesting (emphasis added):

*What sets Epicurus apart from many hedonists, however, is his idea that the greatest (in the sense of most valuable, or most choiceworthy) pleasures are generated in a state of ataraxia, or tranquillity. This is a condition in which a person is free from physical pain and mental distress.*

To me, that gets at an idea of ataraxia (and aponia, although I don't believe the paper mentions that specifically) being the ground on which we can more fully experience other pleasures. Without that ground or foundation, other pleasures are experienced but may be fleeting. With a steady, tranquil mind and healthy body, we are already feeling pleasure, then other pleasures vary our experience.

And I would offer that one can be "tranquil" in activity. It doesn't mean sitting on a cushion, meditating. Or being numb (as some might say, both ancient and modern)!!

By a "complete life," Epicurus meant "one filled with pleasure." Once you're filled, you're complete, the goal has been reached. [PD20](#) uses the phrase.

"Life complete" is conveyed by τὸν παντελεῖ βίον. I contend that this is one of the more important phrases in the original Greek. This is the kind of life that is produced by following the Epicurean path. Again, we have to delve into Epicurus' words to really appreciate what he's saying. Παντελεῖ derives from παν "all, every" + τέλος "goal, end" but not just any goal or end, the ultimate, fully-accomplished end of something, its fully-realized purpose. So, Epicurus is calling us to a life where he believes we can find that every goal is accomplished, every purpose fulfilled IF we understand the limits of pleasure and desire. That will provide us with τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου "the best life" of all the possible ways of living.

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**Post by “Kalosyni” of July 31, 2022 at 9:39 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2611-epicurus-on-pleasure-a-complete-life-and-death-a-defence-alex-voorhoeve/>

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I'm ok with words like "full" and "pure" to the extent that they refer to quantities that are 100% of the respective issue. But "complete" (at least some of the modern interpretations of it) seems to go beyond that, and imply a certain list of activities that everyone should experience in order to call their lives "complete." And I doubt Epicurus would sanction that.

So I like the idea of a "full life" -- which brings up more. I would say that my own peak experience which lasted for maybe only 5 minutes while ecstatic dancing, was a feeling of living to the fullest, at that moment (and in which I had the thought, that it was in that moment that I could die knowing that I had lived the fullest). But yet there is the long term aspect of living a full life, which is more of an intellectual feeling combined with a heart feeling. And I like what Don says:

### [Quote from Don](#)

"Life complete" is conveyed by τὸν παντελῆ βίον. I contend that this is one of the more important phrases in the original Greek. This is the kind of life that is produced by following the Epicurean path. Again, we have to delve into Epicurus' words to really appreciate what he's saying. Παντελῆ derives from παν "all, every" + τέλος "goal, end" but not just any goal or end, the ultimate, fully-accomplished end of something, its fully-realized purpose. So, Epicurus is calling us to a life where he believes we can find that every goal is accomplished, every purpose fulfilled IF we understand the limits of pleasure and desire. That will provide us with τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου "the best life" of all the possible ways of living.

I really like the "full life" idea, but yet I think it is good if it is also combined with the "life complete" idea -- because the feeling of living an incomplete life is not a good feeling. I think that happens a lot in modern life when people say that they have a feeling that their life is incomplete. I think this often points to a lack of good mutually supportive, emotionally supportive and enjoyable relationships. And when we say an incomplete life, we are saying that something important is missing. Now in Buddhism there is the concept of "unsatisfactoriness" which for some people can be a very subtle feeling (perhaps some people feel this feeling more than others). And interestingly there is the Vatican Saying 68 - "Nothing is enough to one for whom enough is very little".

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

a certain list of activities that everyone should experience in order to call their lives "complete." And I doubt Epicurus would sanction that.

The more time I spend thinking on this, the more I think that there really ought to be a list! If you take a step back and think: human beings are a type of animal and what does the human animal need to feel happy? And then to unabashedly answer that question. (This could make for a good topic for our next 20th meeting!)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 31, 2022 at 11:22 AM**

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The more time I spend thinking on this, the more I think that there really ought to be a list! If you take a step back and think: human beings are a type of animal and what does the human animal need to feel happy?

I agree that would be the way to ask the question. Not necessarily a list of activities that everyone needs to experience , but another sort of list.

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### **Post by “reneliza” of August 1, 2022 at 10:42 AM**

I think there's a difference between a list of things you'd like to do if you can get around to it (which would be prioritized in some way) and a list of things a human must do before they die to live a full/complete life (either a personalized, individual list, or a generic list for all people - I don't think either would work)

Copying all of [PD20](#) here as Don linked above

"Bailey: 20. The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life."

The complete life is supplied by the mind, which means it's available to anyone, anytime, and there's no need for more time to search for completeness or to check off more boxes.

I find this one really interesting to think about especially because of this part: "But neither does the mind shun pleasure"

I didn't read the entirety of the OP articles yet, but based on the excerpts Don posted, it seems like the author skirted around a really important idea here. Yes, a tranquil mind is great, yes tranquility is all you need for the *foundation* of a complete life, but there's a risk of guarding your tranquility so carefully that you not only miss out on many pleasures around you, but you actually lose your tranquil mental state to the fear that you will lose your tranquil mental state. Or losing the understanding that pleasure *is* the ultimate good on which that state depends. In other words, to have the complete life offered by a tranquil mind, you can't be afraid of losing your tranquility so much that you never accept any other forms of pleasure.

To me, that is the most compelling reason not to shun pleasure or accept a life of asceticism - because fear of corruption, desire, or dependence is still a vain fear that will interrupt my inner tranquility.

But an Epicurean *could* live a minimal life out of necessity and nothing would be lost or fall short. It would still be a complete life without detraction as long as they still had their reasoned understanding of the good (pleasure) and no fear of death.

(feel free to sub "tranquility" here for ataraxia - or "an untroubled mind")

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### **Post by “reneliza” of August 1, 2022 at 11:04 AM**

This is about Buddhism, so it of course only applies to some extent, but I think it is a good parallel to the Epicurean who tries to force out and run from all forms of pleasure already in their life in their quest for that "greatest" pleasure that is ataraxia.

[The Laughter of Buddha - Osho World](#)

Vision of an Enlightened Master

oshoworld.com

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of August 1, 2022 at 2:36 PM**

| [Quote from reneliza](#)

But an Epicurean could live a minimal life out of necessity and nothing would be lost or fall short. It would still be a complete life without detraction as long as they still had their reasoned understanding of the good (pleasure) and no fear of death.

I think the author makes this point in the second paper. But I could be confusing it with one of these papers...[Ratio Aponia Ataraxia On the Proem of Bo.pdf](#)

[Practicing Ataraxia at Lucretius De reru.pdf](#). I'd never make it as an academic 😊

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of August 1, 2022 at 4:24 PM**

#### [Quote from reneliza](#)

This is about Buddhism, so it of course only applies to some extent, but I think it is a good parallel to the Epicurean who tries to force out and run from all forms of pleasure already in their life in their quest for that "greatest" pleasure that is ataraxia.

So I read the above Osho article, and I think that this it just one interpretation of Buddhism, among several, and it is somewhat different than the Theravadan lineage of Buddhism.

I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around this phrase: "the Epicurean who tries to force out and run from all forms of pleasure already in their life in their quest for that "greatest" pleasure that is ataraxia." I think that is a rare person, and certainly not an Epicurean -- Forgive me, I may have totally misunderstood the meaning here.

As this leaves out another option of seeking and making effort daily to have as much pleasure as one can (yet with wisdom to avoid incurring much worse pains). -- this would be the fullness of pleasure model of pleasure -- which is different than the ataraxia is the goal.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 1, 2022 at 4:40 PM**

I apologize I have not had time to read most of the linked articles so I should probably keep my mouth shut but at risk of saying something stupid:

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2611-epicurus-on-pleasure-a-complete-life-and-death-a-defence-alex-voorhoeve/>

I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around this phrase: "the Epicurean who tries to force out and run from all forms of pleasure already in their life in their quest for that "greatest" pleasure that is ataraxia." I think that is a rare person, and certainly not an Epicurean -- Forgive me, I may have totally misunderstood the meaning here.

As this leaves out another option of seeking and making effort daily to have as much pleasure as one can (yet with wisdom to avoid incurring much worse pains). -- this would be the fullness of pleasure model of pleasure -- which is different than the ataraxia is the goal.

My interpretation of what Reneliza is saying is that she thinks it is a big error to obsess on ataraxia and thereby miss out on many pleasures that are available. Sort of like "don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good" -- especially since in what we are discussing the alleged "perfect" / "tranquility" is very difficult to grasp.

When Kalosyni says she thinks that is a rare person, I would agree that it is rare in fact, but in "theory" it is the alleged direction that many commentators assert was what Epicurus taught. The difficulties we are discussing are why I don't think that's what Epicurus taught -- and I assert the "error" is with the commentators, though with many of them I don't think it's "error" but intentional misrepresentation.

I doubt I will try to comment on the issue of whether some part of this has analogies in Buddhism, but if I had to guess I would suspect that Buddhist influences are part of why this "tranquility" issue is so mesmerizing to the commentators.

I want a life full of pleasures of all kind, mental and physical, and to such a degree that all pain is crowded out of my experience. And in the process of reaching that and continuing it, I don't want to be disturbed. I don't really think that the issues of aponia and ataraxia are significantly more complicated than that.

Cicero, In defense of Publius Sestius, 10.23: "He {Publius Clodius} praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure {the Epicureans}. ... He added that these same men were quite right in saying that the wise do everything for their own interests; that no sane man should engage in public affairs; that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.....

Publius Clodius doesn't have a very elegant or high-sounding name, but I doubt his understanding of Epicurus was very far off the mark.

## Post by “Martin” of August 8, 2022 at 8:35 AM

Osho presented rather a new age hoax instead of an authentic reconstruction of Buddhism.

With new age hoaxes I mean cults which mix genuine quotes of what might be wisdom with trivialities and misleading nonsense masked as deep wisdom. Osho stands out from the new age crowd of pseudo-gurus with his humor and some of his criticisms. If you like satire, reading him for entertainment should be fine but do not waste your time trying to figure out the deep meaning of where he seems difficult to understand. Most likely, there is no such meaning.

We should avoid Osho as a reference for Buddhism because he was too far out at its fringes.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of December 28, 2024 at 4:47 AM

I just read the paper from the first post in this thread... guess I'm a little behind in my reading! I didn't remember this thread; I read the paper and then found the thread. Quite an interesting paper.

Quote from Cassius

I would say that the entire question of having a "complete" life is troublesome. I've probably used that phrasing but I'm not sure how much sense it really makes, and referring to a life as "complete" or "less than complete" smacks of a more absolutist attitude than I would expect Epicurus to take.

I'm ok with words like "full" and "pure" to the extent that they refer to quantities that are 100% of the respective issue. But "complete" (at least some of the modern interpretations of it) seems to go beyond that, and imply a certain list of activities that everyone should experience in order to call their lives "complete." And I doubt Epicurus would sanction that.

Don do you have thoughts on wording that might bear on "complete

The author used a formulation of the good life from Aristotle, and examined how Epicurus' thinking might map on to that. That seemed to be a starting point of the paper: to compare and contrast the two.

From the second paper, which I haven't read (at least not lately):

[Quote from Don](#)

Third, Epicureans hold that the pleasures of tranquillity are valuable because they are produced by inquiry into nature and the best way to live, by crafting our desires accordingly, and by living so that these desires are unlikely to be thwarted. As such, they are an achievement of reason, and one that, as we have seen, leaves luck only a modest role in shaping our lives. The Epicurean tranquil life is therefore autonomous, in the sense that it involves being guided by our reasoned view of the world and our conception of the good and accomplishing what we set out to achieve.

While I understand the qualms of using the word "tranquillity," I think this quote puts it into a proper context.

And further:

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

What sets Epicurus apart from many hedonists, however, is his idea that the greatest (in the sense of most valuable, or most choiceworthy) pleasures are generated in a state of ataraxia, or tranquillity. This is a condition in which a person is free from physical pain and mental distress.

To me, that gets at an idea of ataraxia (and aponia, although I don't believe the paper mentions that specifically) being the ground on which we can more fully experience other pleasures. Without that ground or foundation, other pleasures are experienced but may be fleeting. With a steady, tranquil mind and healthy body, we are already feeling pleasure, then other pleasures vary our experience.

And I would offer that one can be "tranquil" in activity. It doesn't mean sitting on a cushion, meditating. Or being numb (as some might say, both ancient and modern)!!

This, to me, does a good job of describing the relationship of the pleasure of "tranquillity." Not only does it not come from withdrawal, but it enhances other, more fleeting pleasures.