

# Episode One Hundred Thirty Eight - Letter to Menoeceus 5 - Pleasure Part One

Post by "Cassius" of September 1, 2022 at 10:49 PM

Welcome to Episode One Hundred Thirty-Eight of Lucretius Today.

This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

I am your host Cassius, and together with our panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the ancient Epicurean texts, and we'll discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

Today we continue our discussion of [Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus](#), and we discuss \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_ reading today's text:

BAILEY:

We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life.

[128] The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear. And when this is once secured for us, all the tempest of the soul is dispersed, since the living creature has not to wander as though in search of something that is missing, and to look for some other thing by which he can fulfill the good of the soul and the good of the body. For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure.

[129] And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by

which we judge every good.

And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided.

[130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

HICKS:

We must also reflect that of desires some are natural, others are groundless; and that of the natural some are necessary as well as natural, and some natural only. And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live.

[128] He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquility of mind, seeing that this is the sum and end of a blessed life. For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure.

[129] Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing. And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but oftentimes pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them. And oftentimes we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure. While therefore all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good, not all pleasure is choiceworthy, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned.

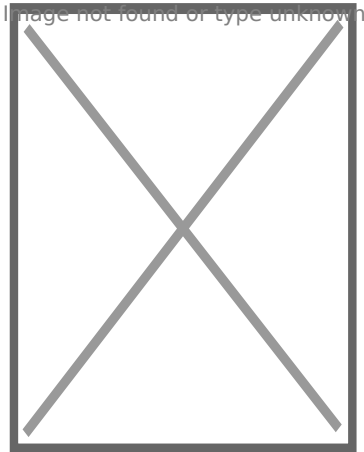
[130] It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as a good.

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**Post by “Don” of September 4, 2022 at 7:23 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoecus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

For anyone interested, here is my commentary and translation:



[Letter To Menoikeus: A New Translation With Commentary : Don Boozar : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

A new translation of the Letter to Menoikeus (Menoecus) by Epicurus with commentary.  
archive.org

Furthermore, on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself. [128] The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life. For the sake of this, we do everything in order to neither be in bodily or mental pain nor to be in fear or dread; and so, when once this has come into being around us, it sets free all of the calamity, distress, and suffering of the mind, seeing that the living being has no need to go in search of something that is lacking for the good of our mental and physical existence. For it is then that we need pleasure, if we were to be in pain from the pleasure not being present; but if we were to not be in pain, we no longer desire or beg for pleasure. And this is why we say pleasure is the foundation and fulfillment of the blessed life. [129] Because we perceived pleasure as a fundamental good and common to our nature, and so, as a result of this, we begin every choice and rejection against this, judging every good thing by the standard of how that pleasure affects us or how we react to considering experiencing that pleasure. And because pleasure is the fundamental and inborn good, this is why not every pleasure is seized and we pass by many pleasures when greater unpleasant things were to result for us as a result: and we think many pains better than pleasures whenever greater pleasure were to follow for a longer time by patiently abiding the pain. [130] So, all pleasure, through its nature, belongs to us as a good; however, not all are elected; and just as all pains are entirely evil by their nature, so not all are always to be shunned. It is proper when judging these things to consider what is advantageous and what is not advantageous for you; in other words, what the

consequences will be. We consult the consequences of our actions; because, on the one hand, pleasure over time can lead to pain; and on the other hand, pain can lead to pleasure.

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## Post by “Don” of September 4, 2022 at 2:38 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself.

Several points. Not necessarily original, just on my mind.

There are two primary categories of desires:

A. Empty/fruitless/vain/groundless ones

B. Natural ones

So, whatever desires are not empty are natural

Of the Natural ones, there are:

A. Just natural ones (these are sometimes qualified as "not necessary" in some parts of the text but not here; here it says they're "only natural")

B. Those natural AND necessary

Of these natural AND necessary ones, there are:

1. Those necessary for eudaimonia

2. Those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body

3. Those necessary for life itself

I have a hard time figuring out what falls into B1. What is "necessary" for my well-being? If I translate it another way, what is "necessary" to make me happy?

However, what if we look at it differently? Is B1 concerned with mental disposition and B2 specifically addressing physical disturbance? Is eudaimonia primarily mental or both mental

and physical? But then how to integrate B3 into the mix? I'm convinced it is NOT a hierarchy but rather a classification system.

For B2...

127i. αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

ἀοχλησία "freedom from disturbance"

σώματος genitive singular of σῶμα

σῶμα "the body; one's material body or existence"

"then, those [necessary] for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those [necessary] for life itself."

There are some translations that interpret αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν to mean only things like clothing and shelter - those things that provide "freedom from disturbance" for the body, that is for one's physical existence. That isn't literally what is written so that is simply one interpretation. Those kinds of things - clothing and shelter - would seem to fall under the final category of those necessary for life. So, this category should catch those between eudaimonia and those necessary for life. This is an interesting category.

I would contend that those "necessary for life itself" are those essentials at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: food, water, shelter, sleep, air, etc. Again, clothing and shelter would seem to fall into this category.

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## Post by "Cassius" of September 4, 2022 at 11:30 PM

Episode 138 - The Letter to Menoecus 05 - On Pleasure (Part One) - is now available!

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/51144270>

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## Post by "Don" of September 5, 2022 at 9:27 PM

67. I do not think I could conceive of the good\*\* without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoecus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἔγωγε ἔχω τί νοήσω τάγαθόν\*\* ἀφαιρῶν μὲν τὰς διὰ χυλῶν ἡδονάς, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀφροδισίων, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀκροαμάτων, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ καὶ τὰς διὰ μορφῆς κατ' ὄψιν [those by way of shapes and along with vision] ἡδεΐας κινήσεις [pleasing motion].

- οὐδὲ γὰρ ἔγωγε ἔχω τί νοήσω [thinking/conceiving] τάγαθόν
- I do not believe I am about to be thinking/conceiving of the good
- ἀφαιρῶν μὲν τὰς διὰ χυλῶν ἡδονάς,
- to take away the pleasures of taste/ flavor
- ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀφροδισίων,
- and to take away those through sexual desire,
- ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀκροαμάτων,
- to take away those through hearing (song and speech)
- ἀφαιρῶν δὲ καὶ τὰς διὰ μορφῆς κατ' ὄψιν [those by way of shapes and along with vision] ἡδεΐας κινήσεις [pleasing motion].

\*\*"the good" τάγαθόν This is the same word used in the Tetrpharmakon as well as the same word used in other texts that talk about "The Good"

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 5, 2022 at 9:30 PM**

Don that reminds me of the formulation of pleasure as related to "smooth motion." I think the last time I looked that up I didn't track it to Epicurus but to someone earlier. I wonder if that last part of the passage is related to that issue of "smooth motion"

(Crédit to Donald Robertson for tracing the smooth motion to the Cyreniacs here <https://donaldrobertson.name/2016/05/21/epi...-the-cyrenaics/> )

That Robertson article raises a number of topics about the Cyreniacs/ Epicurean relationship that we ought to explore.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of September 6, 2022 at 1:15 AM**

[Joshua](#) made an interesting point when he said, if I'm quoting correctly, that desire is a Feeling of pain.

My understanding is different, but I think that it's a valuable point to discuss. I've made the point in other threads that desire and pleasure should not be confused. However I've been on the fence about desire and pain. For now I'll push the idea that desire is *not* a pain but that it *leads* to pain. I think that current neuroscience shows pleasure/pain and desire to be caused by different chemical processes: maybe [Don](#) or [reneliza](#) would care to weigh in on this.

[PD10](#) and [PD11](#) both mention pain and desire, which is why I was previously on the fence. But as I read them now, it appears that these PDs treat them as different things.

[PD10](#) *"If the objects which are productive of pleasures to profligate persons really freed them from fears of the mind—the fears, I mean, inspired by celestial and atmospheric phenomena, the fear of death, the fear of pain—if, further, they taught them to limit their desires, we should not have any reason to censure such persons, for they would then be filled with pleasure to overflowing on all sides and would be exempt from all pain, whether of body or mind, that is, from all evil."* Hicks (1910)

This seems to be making a clear distinction between pain and desire.

[PD11](#) *"If we had never been molested by alarms at celestial and atmospheric phenomena, nor by the misgiving that death somehow affects us, nor by neglect of the proper limits of pains and desires, we should have had no need to study natural science."* Hicks (1910)

However this one isn't so clear. But for now I'm sticking to the idea that desire is not a Feeling.

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2022 at 4:01 AM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

For now I'll push the idea that desire is not a pain but that it leads to pain

This is a good discussion. For the moment at least I am still more where Martin was in the podcast, that desires are not inherently good or bad, pleasurable or painful, as a whole, but that they are a kind of mechanism or will or drive that can be immediately or can lead to pleasure or pain.

One thing I am sure of is that the dead have no desires, and I cannot consider that to be a good thing, so that a general call to limit ALL desires cannot be correct. When Epicurus made the statement about if you want to make a certain person rich, limit his desire, I feel like that has to be related to some specific aspect of the person being discussed.

We desire enlightenment on these issues as a means of living happier lives. That desire can be met through knowledge, but the existence of the desire hardly seems something in general to be considered to be painful or a bad thing.

To hold generally that pleasure is "good" but the desire for pleasure is "bad" would hardly seem to be a workable or logical construction.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of September 6, 2022 at 6:45 AM**

It is also probably relevant to this conversation to note the opening "hymn to Venus" in Lucretius. It is the desire / drive for Pleasure which motivates all living things in the pursuit and continuance of life. Maybe we experience this as a "spur" to move forward, and maybe spurs can be analogized to a discomfort with existing circumstances, but I cannot imagine anything more destructive to the human race - or to life itself - than the demonizing of this drive. This is what I would condemn in religions or other philosophies wherever they exist, and so I cannot imagine that a general condemnation of the desire for pleasure exists in Epicurus. Yes desires that are misguided which result in more pain than pleasure are certainly on any list to minimize, but the flip side must also be true: desires which in fact leads to more pleasure than pain deserve to be encouraged and magnified.

You only live once. The goal of life is not to become a corpse.

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### **Post by "Don" of September 6, 2022 at 7:37 AM**

Wonderful and potentially very fruitful discussion!! Having this many insightful and curious people on the podcast and on the forum is a boon!

I realize I'm heading deep into the weeds with this post, but, as is my habit, I wanted to try to get at what the ancients thought when they used the word we're translating as "desire": epithymia επιθυμία. Where did it show up? What connotations did it have? How was it defined at the time?

I found this paper:



χαρά khara (joy - NOTE: one of the two named "kinetic" pleasures, too!)

So, first comes desire, then pleasure, then joy in this scheme.

On the other side:

Pain

{phobos (fear)

|

ponos (pain)

|

lypē/lupē (pain, grief, distress; see LSJ below)

So, fear then pain then the feeling of distress as opposed to joy in the other column)

The middle word θυμός thymos is tricky. I've placed the LSJ entry below. Basically, those sequences make up the mind or soul.

I'm sharing all this because I found that sequence in the middle interesting and the distinctions made among the components potentially intriguing for the discussion. I haven't read the whole paper yet but the diagram popped out. These texts were written c. 50-150 CE so several hundred years post-Epicurus but still within the classical Epicurean time period albeit from a very different perspective. However, those words were common ways of speaking about pain, pleasure, feelings, desire, etc.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἐπιθυμῖα](#)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, πῦρ, πάγχαλκος, πάθος](#)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, παῖθ-η](#)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, θυμός](#)

Epicurus uses ponos for pain here:

486. Pain does not consist in being deprived of things, but rather in bearing the avoidable distress caused by groundless opinion. οὐκ ἀπορεῖν τούτων πόνος ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ φέρειν μᾶλλον τὸν ἀνόνητον ἐκ τῶν κενῶν δοξῶν πόνον.

However he also uses other words for pain elsewhere (especially words connoting disturbance, etc) but πόνος is here in 486.

## Post by "Cassius" of September 6, 2022 at 8:56 AM

Don I think that's a very important direction to pursue. At various places I have read that the ancients did not seem to have an exact equivalent to what we talk about as "will" or "willpower" and I presume that what we are at least in part talking about is whatever it is that we consider our basic "motivational spark" to be. "Desire" seems closely related to "will/willpower" and we need to explore the differences.

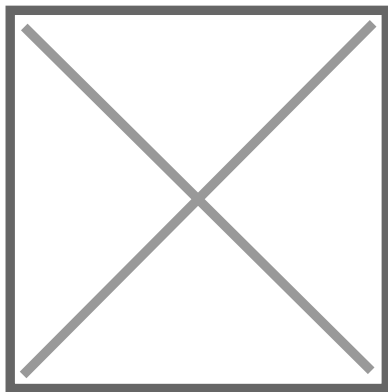
I have not had time to explore your links but I presume we need to trace the Latin equivalents as well. It always seems logical to me to presume that the people who lived and interacted the closest with the Greeks and whose language we can also identify with (even better than the Greek) deserve great attention in the way they translated the Greek.

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## Post by "Don" of September 6, 2022 at 9:20 AM

I may take you up on your idea with Latin although I am woefully ignorant of that language. If someone else wants to jump in the linguistic pool, come in! 😊

As a first step, just saw this paper



[The Meaning of "Will" \(Voluntas\) in Augustine](#)

This article (published in Augustinian Studies 37.2) argues that Augustine uses voluntas as a translation for Stoic *hormē*, i.e. impulse toward action; it uses...

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

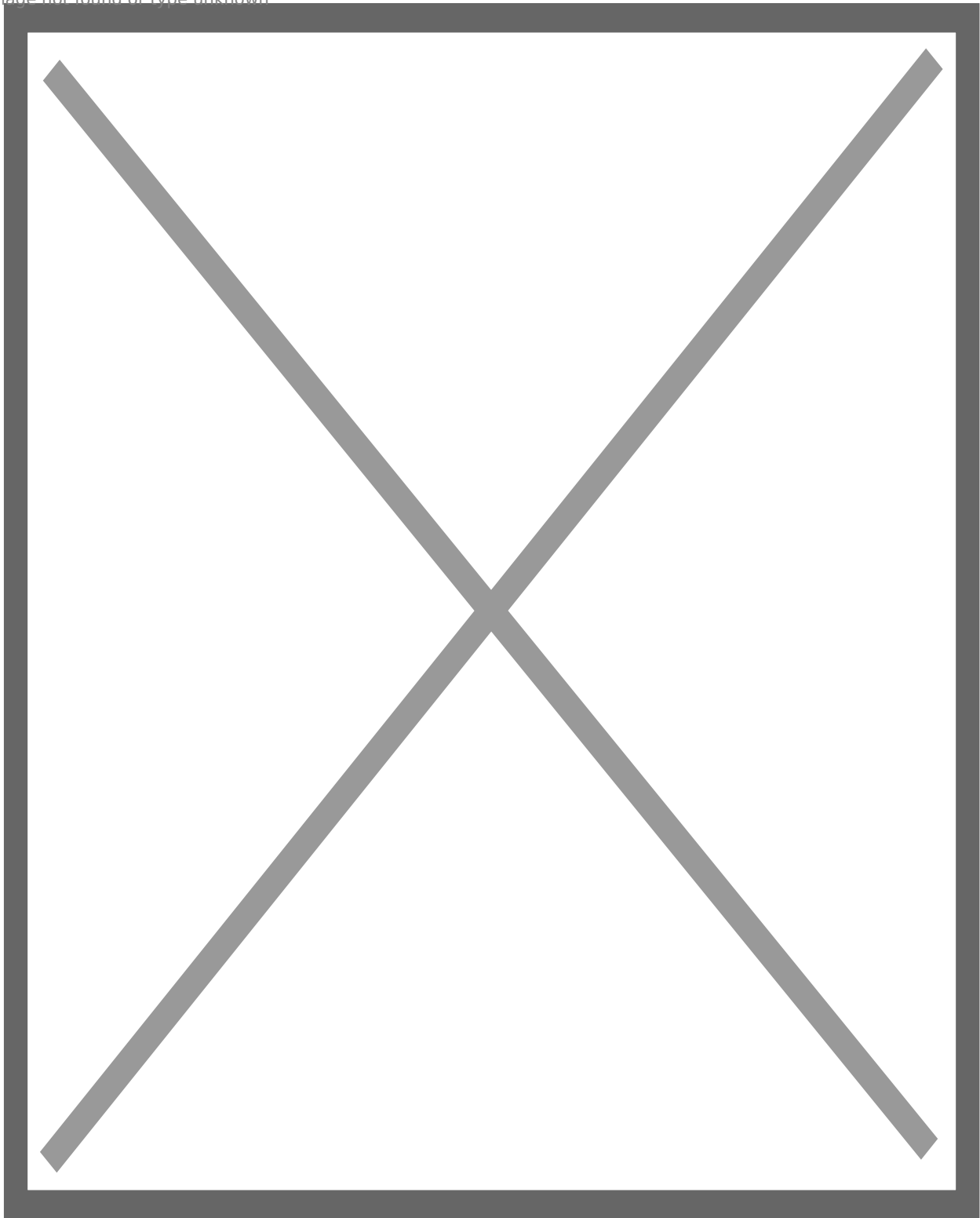
But I'll have to try and figure out what got used in Lucretius and Cicero in relation to Epicurean themes.

## **Post by “Don” of September 6, 2022 at 9:58 AM**

More resources of varying academic rigor:

[The Passions according to the Stoa](#)

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[Concupiscence - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)  
en.wikipedia.org

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoceus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

## Chastity and Lust

Way too Christian but I thought this might be helpful:

§ 4. Ἐπιθυμία / *epithumia* = *DESIRE, LONGING, LUST*

[*Latin: desiderio*]

1. In classical Greek: In Homer and the pre-Socratics ἐπιθυμία / *epithumia* denotes the direct impulse towards food, sexual satisfaction etc., and also desire in general. In the first instance there is nothing morally objectionable or even suspicious about it. Plato and Aristotle still use the term in a neutral sense; however, they encourage theoretical and practical aloofness from the sensual world. Thus from the Stoics onwards ἐπιθυμία / *epithumia* acquires a negative connotation in philosophical circles.

So, it looks like the Christians and Stoics started using *epithymia/epithumia* (u/y both transliterate Greek upsilon υ) negatively for "lust" but it didn't start out that way.

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### **Post by “Don” of September 6, 2022 at 10:22 AM**

#### [Perseus Search Results](#)

Not that many instances of *desiderio* in Lucretius? Must be using another word for desire.

PS. From this...

<https://brill.com/downloadpdf/book/9789004233447/B9789004233447-s003.pdf%3FpdfjsInlineViewToken%3D966890815%26inlineView%3Dtrue&ved=2ahUKEwiEo8n5qID6AhUck4>

It appears the usual Latin translation of Greek *epithymia* was *voluntas*.

[Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary, vōluntas](#)

So in Lucretius...

#### [Perseus Search Results](#)

So more than *desiderio* but not as many as I'd expect. Assuming there are more in Cicero.

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### **Post by “Don” of September 6, 2022 at 12:40 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoceus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

To bring this back to the discussion started on the podcast, it seems to me that desire (epithymia/ voluntas) is a feeling (falling under the pathē) but also an act of will so to speak. From that table above, desire (epithymia) is a feeling of something that results in some pleasure. The opposite of desire is fear (phobos) which appears to be a feeling repelling against something that leads to pain. There are only two categories of feeling because you can only be attracted or repelled by feelings leading to pleasure or pain.

Discuss 😊

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### Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2022 at 1:28 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Discuss 😊

And we probably don't want to forget "pathe" since that seems to be the blanket term for pleasure and pain.

Is desire a "pathe" or a subset of that term?

Lots of questions and few answers right now but this is how we eventually punch our way out of the paper bag of considering all desire to be actually or potentially "bad."

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### Post by “Joshua” of September 6, 2022 at 2:07 PM

Quote

From that table above, desire (epithymia) is a feeling of something that results in some pleasure. The opposite of desire is fear (phobos) which appears to be a feeling repelling against something that leads to pain.

I'm not sure I can get on board with the underlined part above. Lucian opposes fear to *hope*, which I think is nearer the mark;

Quote

And from this point, as Thucydides might say, the war takes its beginning. These ambitious scoundrels were quite devoid of scruples, and they had now joined forces; it could not escape their penetration that human life is under the absolute dominion of two mighty principles, fear and hope (ἐλπίδος καὶ φόβου) and that anyone who can make these serve his ends may be sure of a rapid fortune.

Which drives me on to my next (tentative) conclusion--that fear and hope are both *kinds* of desire. Desire is everything that happens when you see things as they are, and wish that they were different. When unscrupulous scoundrels prey on hope and fear, they prey on desire.

And now for the tricky part--if I defend my thesis that desire presents as a feeling of pain, how do I avoid the path that Cassius is rightly concerned about? In truth I don't think there's a real problem here, because I don't think that pain is necessarily "bad" or "evil". If I lean against a hot stove, I ought to be thankful that nature has furnished a biological alarm system warning me to move quickly, or risk serious injury. Rocks and gods and corpses can get by without pain, but not me--I need pain in order to go on living. Some rare people don't experience pain, and are at high risk for an early or sudden death;

#### [Congenital insensitivity to pain - Wikipedia](#)

##### Quote

Congenital insensitivity to pain (CIP), also known as congenital analgesia, is one or more extraordinarily rare conditions in which a person cannot feel (and has never felt) physical pain.[1] The conditions described here are separate from the HSAN group of disorders, which have more specific signs and cause. Because feeling physical pain is vital for survival, CIP is an extremely dangerous condition.[1] It is common for people with the condition to die in childhood due to injuries or illnesses going unnoticed.[1][2] Burn injuries are among the more common injuries.

So I don't want to lose the sensation of pain. I also very generally don't want to *experience* the sensation of pain--it's necessary, and very natural, but it doesn't feel good--I'd rather experience continuous pleasure.

I think it's like that with desire. I understand that I have a 2 or 3 pound mammalian brain, and that, having that, I am driven almost constantly by the desire for things that are likewise desired by nearly all other mammals--the desire for food, water, shelter, warmth, sex, rest, etc. In addition to these are the particularly human desires, cultivated by things like community engagement, culture, society, economics, etc.

I cannot fulfill all of my desires. Moreover, Epicurus recognized a tendency in us to develop new desires when we have worn out or satisfied the old ones. If desire *is* a kind of pain, as I argue, and if I cannot fulfill *all* of my desires, the question naturally arises as to what I should do about them. It is by no means obvious or self-evident that, because desire is a kind of pain, the only thing left to do is to spurn desire, suppress it, condemn it, or bury it in a hole. I have basically four options; I can try to fulfill them all, and inevitably fail. I can spit contempt on them all, and probably end up dead sooner than later. I can proceed more or less reactively and without a plan, satisfying the easy desires as they pass and seldom reaching far for the difficult ones. Or I can develop and establish a plan of choice and avoidance, with the goal of maximizing pleasurable outcomes over the course of a whole human life. Some desires will have to be put by; some will have to be vigorously rejected; some will be indulged for the sake of pleasure, and some other few will be made into something like a life's ambition--the desire which, well-chosen, will become the theme of a life well-lived.

Can we expect such an outcome from desire, if desire is a kind of pain? Why not? Pain is not nature's moral or judicial punishment--pain, like pleasure, is one of nature's guide-posts. Desire and pain direct us toward lives of pleasure and remembrance--the happy memory of all that we have come to enjoy in our lives. If there is an opposite to desire, then let that be it.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of September 6, 2022 at 2:47 PM**

Quote from Joshua

...I don't think that pain is necessarily "bad" or "evil".

I agree with much of [Joshua](#)'s post. A point to clarify, at least in my mind, is that rather than being bad or evil, pain is a guide pointing away from health. Pleasure is a guide pointing toward health. If you ignore your pain (or have CIP) then you can expect results harmful to your well-being. When you overdo pleasure seeking, pain will generally guide you back to reasonable pleasure seeking.

Pleasure is a guide toward healthy outcomes, pain is a guide away from unhealthy outcomes. Desires are neither. Or both. In this way they are different from pleasure and pain; they're more like attractions rather than guides.

The question remains whether they are feelings, sensations, thoughts, or something else....

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2022 at 3:53 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoceus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

point to clarify, at least in my mind, is that rather than being bad or evil, pain is a guide pointing away from health.

If indeed desire is a guide, and it is part of the healthy functioning of the organism to experience it, would it not be equally or more proper to call it a pleasure?

I think an argument can readily be made that these feelings of desire are not problems, but the healthy functioning we should wish to occur, and that we find these spurs to action pleasurable rather than painful.

Wasting away from lack of food is certainly painful, but having an appetite for a good meal strikes me as readily something that can be considered pleasurable.

If ALL feeling must be categorized as pleasure or pain, then I could see desire being listed among the pleasures at least as readily as a month the pains.

When we lose all desire, we die. In a very real sense life IS at root the desire for pleasure. Robots and the dead cannot feel or desire. Is not in a very real sense life the ability to desire?

Would the [Epicurean gods](#) feel pleasure in their blessedness if they did not desire that pleasure?

Maybe the ultimate point is that the ability to feel, the ability to experience pain, is "good" in the sense that it is life, and "desire" is just a subset of pain as the motivation to continue to life on. We never "desire" pain but we use the faculty of feeling as the guide to maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

I think I can work up a good head of steam to argue that desire is at the root of what it means to be alive, which is why advocacy of suppression of all desire strikes me as so "evil."

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### **Post by “Joshua” of September 6, 2022 at 4:28 PM**

#### Quote

I think I can work up a good head of steam to argue that desire is at the root of what it means to be alive, which is why advocacy of suppression of all desire strikes me as so "evil."

Yes, but that's not my position either.

Quote

I think an argument can readily be made that these feelings of desire are not problems, but the healthy functioning we should wish to occur, and that we find these spurs to action pleasurable rather than painful.

But that's exactly what pain is--a healthfully functioning signal that something is wrong and needs to change.

Quote

When we lose all desire, we die. In a very real sense life IS at root the desire for pleasure. Robots and the dead cannot feel or desire. Is not in a very real sense life the ability to desire?

This is true also for pain.

Quote

Would the [Epicurean gods](#) feel pleasure in their blessedness if they did not desire that pleasure?

It's not clear to me how desire for a thing and the experience of a thing can reside together--the pleasure fulfills the desire. I'm no longer thirsty after I've drunk...

If the gods desire what they already have, this sounds more to me like they're jealous of what they have, which seems to imply a fear that they could lose it.

Quote

The question remains whether they are feelings, sensations, thoughts, or something else....

This is really what we need to figure out. I could be convinced (maybe) that desire is not necessarily a kind of pain, but I really reject including it among pleasures. The very existence of desire indicates a lack of satisfaction.

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**Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2022 at 4:53 PM**

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

The very existence of desire indicates a lack of satisfaction.

Maybe that is a large part of the problem of terminology, and gets us into the "confident expectation" material.

If I am happy and healthy now, I still want to "desire" that to continue. I am never satisfied to think "Ah, I am happy now, I need nothing more, time to die." I always want ("desire") the continuation of pleasure, even though I know that in the end I will die and I will experience no more. Even when I am closed to my experience being full of pleasure and all pain being absent, I still want that experience to continue.

Possibly we need to go back to the physics for help here. It has seemed to me in the past that the key to proper interpretation of many aspects of the philosophy is that nothing is ever truly "at rest" -- our atoms are constantly moving, our bodies and minds are constantly functioning, and they never stop until we die. That observation is also helpful in seeing the limits of "tranquility" - we're never really at rest. We may wish our sailing to be smooth and undisturbed, but the analogy of sitting at anchor in a harbor in perpetuity "is not what ships are for."

We at the very least desire this motion to continue, and we cannot ever say "I have reached a state of motion that I find perfect and therefore I will freeze everything in place." That is not possible, nor a conceptually sound way to look at life, I would have to think.

So I don't know that the "very existence of desire" in the most general sense indicates a lack of satisfaction, unless you want to say that you should be satisfied where you are at a particular moment and then stop all the activities of life and die.

So maybe I would argue that the existence of desire indicates that you are alive - not that you are in a state of frustration.

I can certainly see that the desire to stay alive runs into the knowledge that we can't do that perpetually, but when you drill down that level I think you're at the point of the cliché of "making the perfect the enemy of the good."

Perfection (eternal life) is not possible to us, but that does not mean that we consider life, and the desire for its continuance through a natural lifespan, to itself be a frustration. Does it?

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**Post by "Cassius" of September 6, 2022 at 5:09 PM**

I think Martin's observations in the podcast were particularly helpful when he referred to pleasure as a "drive for action" or something like that. I remember analogizing that to Nietzsche's "will to power" phrase. I've never understood Nietzsche well enough to be sure what he was talking about, and I can't parse his original German phrase. But with the understanding that the "power" being referenced is not "power over other people" but "the power to obtain one's desires," I think the phrase fits what we are talking about. And I would think that given all the urgency that Epicurus and Lucretius display in pursuing pleasure without delay, and with knowledge that life is short, a good case can be made that "desire," in the very general sense of the will to pursue a pleasurable life, is something that Epicurus would urge to be maximized.

The issue seems to me to be that like "Pleasure," the word "desire" is a very high level abstraction and includes within in innumerable examples, some of which will lead to greater pleasure than pain if pursued, and some of which will lead to more pain than pleasure if pursued. And at that level it doesn't make sense to consider "desire in general" to be a negative thing, but rather a positive, and to ensure that it is a positive by categorizing the desires according to their expectancy of in fact leading to greater pleasure if pursued (which is in fact what the natural and necessary formula does).

So just like Pleasure, some Desires are to be pursued in certain circumstances, and some should not be pursued, but at no point do we consider either "Pleasure" or "Desire" to be tainted terminology. In fact I would come very close to applying the same phrasing as in the letter and paraphrase the result as: "All Desires are good, because they are desirable, but some desires may lead to more pain than pleasure and thus should not be chosen."

Of course that takes us down the road of parsing what "good" means, but that kind of parsing comes with the territory when there are no absolute standards, and only the feelings of pleasure and pain as ultimate guides.

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## Post by "Godfrey" of September 6, 2022 at 6:57 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

So just like Pleasure, some Desires are to be pursued in certain circumstances, and some should not be pursued, but at no point do we consider either "Pleasure" or "Desire" to be tainted terminology. In fact I would come very close to applying the same phrasing as in the letter and paraphrase the result as: "All Desires are good, because they are desirable, but some desires may lead to more pain than pleasure and

thus should not be chosen."

Rather than being a question of what the good is, to me this approach invites confusing desires with pleasures. [Martin](#) 's description seems quite accurate. The confusion might come about because, as far as I can tell, Epicurus didn't define desire. He only gave categories of desires. But if we look to modern science (to my understanding) we see that desire is different from pleasure or pain. Even though he didn't define desire, by his treatment of the various ideas I think it's clear that Epicurus was in basic agreement with modern science.

Did Aristotle or Plato define desire? Maybe Epicurus felt no need to define it because he had no objection to the common notion of it.

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### **Post by “Don” of September 6, 2022 at 7:31 PM**

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

I would come very close to applying the same phrasing as in the letter and paraphrase the result as: "All Desires are good, because they are desirable, but some desires may lead to more pain than pleasure and thus should not be chosen.

I want to go back through the arguments in the thread and reasons, but this one stuck out to me.

I'd have to say no to that paraphrase. Epicurus explicitly describes some desires as groundless, empty, vain. That doesn't sound like a description of something "good." In fact, it sounds like something to be avoided.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2022 at 9:05 PM**

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

Epicurus explicitly describes some desires as groundless, empty, vain. That doesn't sound like a description of something "good." In fact, it sounds like something to be avoided.

Yes I think we've got an interplay of issues here mainly arising from the word desire and how specifically to define in.

Pleasure is the only word that Epicurus held to be always "good" -- Did he say that specifically, or is [PD08](#) the closest to that? ([PD08](#). No pleasure is a bad thing in itself; but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures.)

So maybe the better question to ask in paraphrase would be - Would it be correct to say?

*"No desire is a bad thing in itself, but some desires bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasure achievable from the pursuit of the desire."*

Or was Epicurus saying that some desires (e.g., *seeking to live forever*) are intrinsically "bad"? Seeking to overcome death would jump out at me as an example of a desire that would in every case lead to frustration, but even that one might be viewed in a better light depending on how the desire was pursued. Would it not be ok for a medical researcher to spend their lives on life extension research, if that researcher didn't obsess over success?

Examples of desires we might generally agree would lead to bad results (seeking great political power, riches, etc) would likely still not be something that Epicurus would say would "always" lead to undesirable results. (And if the result doesn't "always" happen then the thing is not intrinsically bad, correct?)

So where I am going is that unless we can articulate a desire that is intrinsically "bad" then we've got to set up a definition of "Desire" that accounts for its essential role in life but also describes how it can be misused.

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## Post by "Don" of September 6, 2022 at 10:36 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Pleasure is the only word that Epicurus held to be always "good" -- Did he say that specifically, or is [PD08](#) the closest to that?

Letter to Menoikeus: [130] So, all pleasure, through its nature, belongs to us as a good; however, not all are elected; and just as all pains are entirely evil by their nature, so not all are always to be shunned. It is proper when judging these things to consider what is advantageous and what is not advantageous for you; in other words, what the consequences will be. We consult the consequences of our actions; because, on the one hand, pleasure over time can lead to pain; and on the other hand, pain can lead to pleasure.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 6, 2022 at 10:41 PM

The only things which are intrinsically "good" or "bad" are pleasure (good) and pain (bad). Everything else, including desire, only lead to greater or lesser pleasure or pain.

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2022 at 11:01 PM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

The only things which are intrinsically "good" or "bad" are pleasure (good) and pain (bad). Everything else, including desire, only lead to greater or lesser pleasure or pain

And Epicurus saying in the letter that sometimes we treat the good as bad and the bad as good is a very clear statement and stark reminder of how "relative" those terms (good and bad) really are.

Nevertheless the world throws around those terms (good and bad) as if they were handed down on tablets from Mt. Sinai!

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## Post by “Don” of September 6, 2022 at 11:05 PM

One of the issues at play here seems to be the use of the words "good" and "bad" which begins to - albeit unconsciously - give desire and pain and pleasure a moral coloring. I don't think that's useful for our discussions, so I would like to steer us away from any deliberate or accidental moral arguments.

In the original, pain is *κακος* *kakos* which is sometimes translated as bad but the original had the following connotations:

*As a measure of quality: bad, worthless, useless*

*As a measure of appearance: ugly, hideous*

*Of circumstances: injurious, wretched, unhappy*

*As a measure of character: low, mean, vile, evil*

As a "measure of character", yes, maybe we could interpret kakos as "bad" or "evil" but only because a person with that character is going to cause distress, pain, etc.

But applied to pain itself, we have to look at a "measure of quality", so pain is bad like a piece of rotten fruit has gone "bad." It's worthless, useless, etc. Or as a "measure of appearance," pain leads to unhappiness, to a wretched existence, etc.

But pain is not morally "bad."

Desires are not "bad" or "good." They are "natural" or "κενος 'kenos'/empty (like the void)." Empty is not a moral judgement. To me, it beautifully encapsulates the "groundless" nature of those desires. They can never be filled, never be satisfied, it's like trying to fill the void. It can't be done.

Pleasure is our innate "agathos/good" because it elicits the opposite of pain, moving us to health and peace in our mind and body.

Pain is inherently "kakos/bad" because it elicits the opposite of pleasure, moving us to sickness and distress in our mind and body.

So, I don't think it's helpful to think of desires as "good" or "bad". They just are. I'm going to address my (current) take on what they are in the next post... always reserving the right to revise and extend my remarks. 😊

PS: Extending and revising already here... One of the connotations of agathos "good" and kakos "bad" are useful and useless, respectively. Another way of saying it is beneficial and harmful. Seeing pleasure and pain in that way may be helpful as well.

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## **Post by “Don” of September 6, 2022 at 11:33 PM**

Here's where I'm at on what desires are. Some of this has already been offered by ya'll so I fully admit this is not necessarily original! I'm just consolidating my understanding. So...

The BIG category under which all this falls are the pathe. This literally means "that which happens to someone, that which is experienced." Everything we "feel" falls under this category.

The only ways we experience something is whether it causes us to feel pleasure or whether it causes us to feel pain. That's why - to my understanding - is why Epicurus was so adamant about two feelings especially against the Cyrenaics. If it happens to us, we feel it. Whether

that's a subtle pleasurable feeling or an intense pleasurable feeling or a twinge of pain or a terrible pain. That's it. Only two ways of feeling.

That's why the table in the post above puts pathos/pathe at the top under which are pleasure and pain.

That's why I like the idea of desire and phobos/"fear" being the starting points for the two schemas under pleasure and pain. I took phobos to mean "fear" because it's SO associated with English -phobia now. But at its root it means

*fear, terror, alarm, fright, panic*

*the act of fleeing: flight, retreat*

which is exactly the same idea for the words Epicurus uses for choice and "avoidance" - literally, choice or "flight/fleeing"

Desire is an attraction to something pleasurable

Flight is a repulsion from something that causes pain

The feeling of desire attracts us to a pleasure leading to a feeling of joy/khara (I **\*\*really\*\*** want to explore how khara got into that schema!!)

The feeling of wanting to flee repels us from a pain that leads to a feeling of distress

I don't think we "desire" pain, BUT we can \*choose\* to undergo the pain - fighting the urge to flee - IF we are relatively convinced that going through the pain will lead to a feeling of pleasure. We are choosing to undergo the pain BECAUSE we have a \*desire\* - an attraction - for the pleasure at the other end. We do not have a desire to undergo the pain. We would rather flee from the pain... BUT we can \*choose\* otherwise due to our practice of practical wisdom.

We can anticipate the pleasure, and that in itself is pleasurable.

I'm intrigued by [Joshua](#)'s concept of desire as a lack of satisfaction or a knowledge of some lack in ourselves that we endeavor to fill. But I'm wondering whether it's focusing on a "lack" or whether we're instead focusing on the pleasure that will accrue from fulfilling that desire. It's not the pain that's the focus but the pleasure at the end that initiates a feeling of desire. I'm still working on that. Pain can be a guide, it IS one of the two feelings after all! But it is also something that we don't seek out for its own sake. If someone says "Hot peppers cause pain." Objectively, yes. Subjectively, some people derive pleasure from spicy food. The hot pepper is not "bad" or "good", painful or pleasurable in itself. It is only our feeling about the hot pepper that causes us to be attracted to it or to flee from it.

Still working through this. Consider this my on-going stream of consciousness on this thread!

## Post by “Don” of September 6, 2022 at 11:42 PM

I also think it's instructive to look at that word "natural" in the "natural" and "empty" desires.

Natural is φυσικός "physikos" "natural, produced or caused by nature, inborn, native."

The natural desires are the ones that we're born with, the ones that naturally arise because of our being physical, material, mortal beings.

The "empty" desires then - to me - refer to desires that have been inculcated in us by culture, indoctrination, societal expectations, etc. They do not naturally arise within us. They are desires we've been taught that we "should" have -- lust for power, greed for unlimited wealth, etc. -- but that can never be satisfied.

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## Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 12:11 AM

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

I'm not sure I can get on board with the underlined part above. Lucian opposes fear to *hope*, which I think is nearer the mark;

#### Quote

And from this point, as Thucydides might say, the war takes its beginning. These ambitious scoundrels were quite devoid of scruples, and they had now joined forces; it could not escape their penetration that human life is under the absolute dominion of two mighty principles, fear and hope (ἐλπίδος καὶ φόβου) and that anyone who can make these serve his ends may be sure of a rapid fortune.

Which drives me on to my next (tentative) conclusion--that fear and hope are both *kinds* of desire. Desire is everything that happens when you see things as they are, and wish that they were different. When unscrupulous scoundrels prey on hope and fear, they prey on desire.

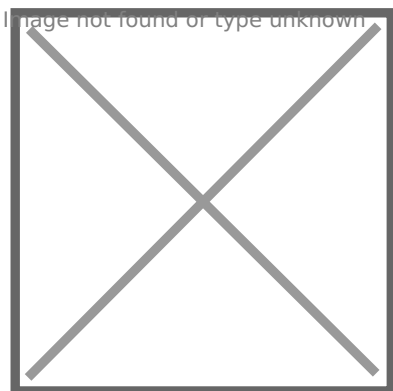
As i mentioned, I'm intrigued by [Joshua](#) 's thesis, and additionally I was taken with the idea of hope and fear (ἐλπίδος καὶ φόβου). So, I was really wondering where Epicurus may have used ἐλπίδος (which is the genitive of ἐλπίς) "hope, confidence, expectation"

Fragment 116: I summon you to unceasing joy and not to empty and trifling virtues, which destroy your confidence in the fruits of what you have. ἐγὼ δ' ἐφ' ἡδονὰς συνεχεῖς παρακαλῶ καὶ οὐκ ἐπ' ἀρετὰς κενὰς καὶ ματαίας καὶ ταραχώδεις ἐχούσας τῶν καρπῶν ἐλπίδας.

Fragment 445: We must not blame the body for the greatest evils nor attribute our troubles to mere circumstance. Instead we seek their cause within the soul: for by giving up every trifling and fleeting desire\*\*\* we give birth to a confidence perfect (ἐλπίδα ὅλοι) in itself. (For \*\*\* see below)

Letter to Menoikeus 134: Because, on the one hand, one can generally hope for the intercession of the gods by means of worship... ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἐλπίδα παραιτήσεως ὑπογράφει θεῶν διὰ τιμῆς

The Strong's Concordance even has this:



[G1680 - elpis - Strong's Greek Lexicon \(kjv\)](#)

G1680 - ἐλπίς elpís, el-pece'; from a primary ἔλπω élpō (to anticipate, usually with pleasure); expectation (abstractly or concretely) or confidence:—faith, ...  
[www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org)

"from a primary ἔλπω élpō (to anticipate, usually with pleasure); expectation (abstractly or concretely) or confidence:—faith, hope"

So, elpis does have sense of "desire for something pleasurable" but it seems to be more of a "confident hope" or "anticipation with the expectation of coming to fruition" whereas "desire" writ large has no sense that it will be fulfilled for sure, it is more a longing for something pleasurable.

Still thinking...

\*\*\*The "trifling and fleeting desires" referenced in Fragment 445 also shed an interesting light on this discussion. Interestingly, the word epithymia is NOT used here:

πᾶσαν ματαίαν τῶν ἐφημέρων ὄρεξις (ἐφημέρων = ephemeron)

"Every trifling 'ephemeral' desire"

ὄρεξις "yearning, longing, desire"

Even LSJ defines it as opposed to φυγή which is the \*exact\* word used by Epicurus in "choice and avoidance/flight"

Epicurus also uses this word in Fragment 202:

He who follows nature and not groundless opinions is completely self-reliant. With regard to what is enough by nature, everything he owns is a source of wealth; whereas with regard to unlimited desires (τὰς ἀορίστους ὄρεξεις), even the greatest wealth is poverty.

It shows up in Demetrius Lacon's PHerc831 (Column 16) as "empty desires" κενῶν [ὄρέ]ξεων

[DCLP/Trismegistos 59491 = LDAB 591](#)

So, in addition to epithymia we have to take orexis into account:

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ὄρεξις](#)

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2022 at 1:38 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

So, I don't think it's helpful to think of desires as "good" or "bad". They just are.

I almost hate to comment on this because my thought is not major and I don't want to interrupt the stream of the posts from Don.

But this formulation prompts me to comment that while pleasure and pain are feelings that are presumably reported "involuntarily", I would think that many desires have a much larger component of voluntary choice in them. I realize the limits to this statement, but we can to some extent by willpower express or suppress our desires, while that is probably not as much true with pain and pleasure itself.

So the comment "they just are" may be true in that they are not inherently bad or good, but if there is a larger component of choice attached to desires then that would be a significant difference (which reminds me of the comment later in the letter about attaching praise or blame).

I remember and agree with what Joshua said in the episode about how often in the end it does not work to suppress desires. But nevertheless there probably is a distinction worth noting in

how most feelings of pain and pleasure are much more immediate and automatic, while many types of desires involve complicated mental calculations that are chosen and far from automatic.

Sorry for the interruption - please carry on Don!

---

### **Post by “Joshua” of September 7, 2022 at 8:28 AM**

Quote

One of the issues at play here seems to be the use of the words "good" and "bad" which begins to - albeit unconsciously - give desire and pain and pleasure a moral coloring.

I resist this formulation as well. Also, the word "natural" has become hugely problematic-- Natural Law, so called, is something like a 4th revelation in Christianity after the person of Jesus and the two testaments. Montaigne made the odd claim that atheism was 'unnatural', and the claims have only gotten worse since.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2022 at 9:54 AM**

[Quote from Joshua](#)

I resist this formulation as well.

Most all of the comments in this thread I agree with and they are very productive to help us challenge ideas that we think are wrong.

I hope everyone will help us remember - however - that our goal should be to eventually emerge from these details with some high-level conclusions about what we think Epicurus was saying. We'll discuss as much of all this as we can on the podcast, but the goal eventually needs to be something in writing that summarizes the major distinctions between "desire" and "pleasure" in Epicurean philosophy.

Perhaps even a comparison chart with Desire and Pleasure as the column headings and as many lines as necessary for the major points about them and how they differ or are the same

as to each point.

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## Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 10:38 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I almost hate to comment on this because my thought is not major and I don't want to interrupt the stream of the posts from Don.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Sorry for the interruption - please carry on Don!

LOL! 😄 Methinks you imbue my stream of consciousness with too much significance, but I appreciate the thought.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

So the comment "they just are" may be true in that they are not inherently bad or good, but if there is a larger component of choice attached to desires then that would be a significant difference (which reminds me of the comment later in the letter about attaching praise or blame).

Oh, I agree! My only intent was to get away from moral judgements. Desires arise naturally from our physical needs and from just living our life but they also arise from things we've been inculcated to desire by society and culture. They're not \*morally\* good or bad but they can be useful to our life and existence or detrimental to our well-being if we choose to follow them. If we choose NOT to follow those that are useful for our life, that's not going to go well for us. Likewise, if we choose TO follow unhealthy or harmful desires, that's not going to go well for us either. But we should leave the morality out of it. "Oh, you did THAT! You're a BAD person!"

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I remember and agree with what Joshua said in the episode about how often in the end it does not work to suppress desires.

Agreed! Suppression seems to me to be unnatural. You can deny there's a tiger behind the tree, but it's going to eat you nevertheless. Likewise, you can deny you have desires - "I can suppress my desires! Look at how righteous I am!" - , but those desires are going to well up,

frustrate you, and they're going to come spilling out one way or the other.

That said, I think one can learn to recognize desires as they arise in the mind and to choose wisely which ones to follow and which ones not to. That's not suppressing our desires. That's gaining the facility to recognize helpful and harmful consequences more readily, more accurately, more wisely. It may look like suppression to someone unaccustomed to this kind of practice, but I think it is a very different thing.

#### [Quote from Joshua](#)

Also, the word "natural" has become hugely problematic--Natural Law, so called, is something like a 4th revelation in Christianity after the person of Jesus and the two testaments. Montaigne made the odd claim that atheism was 'unnatural', and the claims have only gotten worse since.

Agreed. What I like about "natural" in the context of Epicurus's writings and other Epicureans is that - originally - it wasn't tainted with our cultural baggage. But it's hard to extricate it from all that!! That's one thing I was trying to get at in post #31 above. That natural vs empty dichotomy to me is helpful in getting at the idea that "natural" desires arise within us from our being part of Nature: material, mortal beings living our lives. Some "only natural" (or unnecessary) desires come from acculturation (ex., a desire for a particular kind of food that brings pleasurable memories from childhood), but many - to my understanding - empty desires arise from being "told" by society/culture/media that we should - must! - want power, money, numerous material possessions ("Latest iPhone! Gimme! Gimme!"), etc.

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

I hope everyone will help us remember - however - that our goal should be to eventually emerge from these details with some high-level conclusions about what we think Epicurus was saying. We'll discuss as much of all this as we can on the podcast, but the goal eventually needs to be something in writing that summarizes the major distinctions between "desire" and "pleasure" in Epicurean philosophy.

Perhaps even a comparison chart with Desire and Pleasure as the column headings and as many lines as necessary for the major points about them and how they differ or are the same as to each point.

Agreed! Without a conclusion, we turn into ever-arguing Sophists! 😊 Some distinct points for me:

1. I am fully onboard with [Godfrey](#) 's insistence on maintaining the distinction between desire and pleasure. That's important.

2. My current contention is that Pleasure and Pain are the two big categories into which we can categorize everything that happens to us (the literal meaning of pathe).
3. As such, desire as a thing (What kind of thing?) is subordinate to or contained in or a component of one of those two buckets.
4. Observation: We can choose to fulfill a desire. We cannot choose to feel pleasure. I think that's an important distinction between these two categories.
5. Observation: In response to [Joshua](#) , I believe there is a distinction between "desiring something" and "hoping for something." I can desire a particular outcome, or I can hope for something (or as an alternative translation of elpis "have confidence in something happening"). I think those are two different things and I would contend that the desire is more basic while hope/confidence is more aspirational. Hmm... Maybe I'm just wordplaying here, but this is the direction I'm heading. Hope/Confidence/Elpis seems to always point toward a beneficial or pleasurable outcome, whereas the consequence of desire is not always beneficial to me. I can't think that an "empty hope" or "empty confidence" is a logical thing to say. Granted, I may "hope beyond all hope" or something like that. I am reminded of the recent Sandman episode where Dream and Lucifer are battling each other in a "Sword in the Stone" type Wizard duel and SPOILER Dream declares, "I am Hope." "[Lucifer was left flabbergasted and without a suitable counter because the Devil could not conceive of anything that could best Hope.](#)" I don't think it would have had the same impact or result if Dream had declared "I am Desire" (especially because Desire is one of Dream's Endless siblings).
  1. I realize I'm going off on a side track, but I just found [this link on The Sandman fan forum and it specifically links Desire \(of the Endless\) with the Greek word Epithumi](#) a! Sorry. Fan of the comics and the new Netflix show.

That'll do for now. I'll hold off on streaming any more until more can add their thoughts.

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2022 at 11:54 AM

I agree with most everything in that last post. I would want to clarify this part however:

### [Quote from Don](#)

Oh, I agree! My only intent was to get away from moral judgements. Desires arise naturally from our physical needs and from just living our life but they also arise from things we've been inculcated to desire by society and culture. They're not \*morally\* good or bad but they can be useful to our life and existence or detrimental to our well-being if we choose to follow them. If we choose NOT to follow those that are useful for

our life, that's not going to go well for us. Likewise, if we choose TO follow unhealthy or harmful desires, that's not going to go well for us either. But we should leave the morality out of it. "Oh, you did THAT! You're a BAD person!"

You are listing there numbers of ways that desires arise (naturally from physical needs, living our life, things we are inculcated to desire by society and culture. Agreed. But per the letter to Menoeceus do we not also to some degree choose our own desires, consistent with our free will, and indeed to the events arising from those choices praise and blame do attach?

#### Quote

[133] For indeed who, think you, is a better man than he who holds reverent opinions concerning the gods, and is at all times free from fear of death, and has reasoned out the end ordained by nature? He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain; he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame

"They're not \*morally\* good or bad " I think I would agree with that statement, since we are basically jettisoning absolute standards of morality, with the result that we are pretty much talking about "What we find to be desirable" and "What we find to be distasteful." But within the paradigm that there is no absolute morality, there is still sort of a factual or consensus "agreement" (possibly related to the justice discussion) that it is valid for us to consider some actions to be praiseworthy and others to be blameworthy.

I am thinking that is a very important part of this discussion. We're all in agreement I think in Epicurean terms that there is no "absolute" morality in the sense established by supernatural gods or ideal forms. But on the other hand there always remains pleasure and pain, and among our friends at least we presumably share certain views on what makes us happy and what makes us sad, and through that perspective there does in fact remain an important concept of "praiseworthiness" and "blameworthiness."

So - "Oh, you did THAT! You're a BAD person!" cannot refer to an absolute morality, but to the extent we want to define "bad" we can still talk about our norms of agreement on working together for our mutual benefit and not harming each other.

Correct or no?

## Post by "Don" of September 7, 2022 at 12:54 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

But per the letter to Menoecus do we not also to some degree choose our own desires, consistent with our free will, and indeed to the events arising from those choices praise and blame do attach?

Oh, agreed. But I would re-word your statement to say:

"We choose which of our desires *we will fulfill*, consistent with our free will"

We don't necessarily choose which desires arise within us. Many - most? - of our desires arise from things outside of ourselves. Of course, we have desires to drink, eat, etc., that arise from bodily interoception. We may also have desires that arise naturally from within our memories of past pleasures we'd like to repeat. But we also have desires that arise from outside influences - people talking, commercials (in the modern world), reading, etc. Desires we may not have thought of without those outside influences.

So, I'm not entirely convinced that we "choose" our desires entirely. But I am completely onboard with the fact that we "choose" to follow or avoid desires which arise.

And this is exactly why we can attach praise or blame to the consequences of the act of fulfilling those desires which we choose to act upon. We have the free will to act on desires or not to act on desires. We are responsible for our actions, and, in some senses, ALL actions are the result of fulfilling certain desires.

Here's my translation of that Menoikeus section:

*For that person, even though some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some by our own power, for although necessity is beyond our control, they see that chance is unstable and there is no other master beyond themselves, so that praise and its opposite are inseparably connected to themselves.*

Those things that happen "by our own power" are our responsibility. We can be praised for some things that we do, and we can get the opposite of praise for other things that come about "by our own power." If some action is detrimental to our own well-being or harmful to society at large, we can be held responsible for that if it was indeed "by our own power" that it came about. We can't be held responsible for someone's boat being wrecked at sea. We CAN be held responsible if we were the one to forget to tie it off at the harbor and it drifted out and THEN got wrecked in a storm. Okay, that's maybe a weird example but I'll let it stand.

## Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2022 at 1:09 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

We don't necessarily choose which desires arise within us. Many - most? - of our desires arise from things outside of ourselves.

As to the arising of desires (thoughts?) there is of course also the Epicurean theory of images:

### [15.16] Cicero to Cassius

[Rome, January, 45 B.C.]

I expect you must be just a little ashamed of yourself now that this is the third letter that has caught you before you have sent me a single leaf or even a line. But I am not pressing you, for I shall look forward to, or rather insist upon, a longer letter. As for myself, if I always had somebody to trust with them, I should send you as many as three an hour. For it somehow happens, that whenever I write anything to you, you seem to be at my very elbow; and that, not by way of visions of images, as your new friends term them, who believe that even mental visions are conjured up by what [Catius](#) calls spectres (for let me remind you that Catius the [Insubrian](#), an [Epicurean](#), who died lately, gives the name of spectres to what the famous [Gargettian](#) [Epicurus], and long before that [Democritus](#), called images).

2 But, even supposing that the eye can be struck by these spectres because they run up against it quite of their own accord, how the mind can be so struck is more than I can see. It will be your duty to explain to me, when you arrive here safe and sound, whether the spectre of you is at my command to come up as soon as the whim has taken me to think about you - and not only about you, who always occupy my inmost heart, but suppose I begin thinking about the Isle of [Britain](#), will the image of that wing its way to my consciousness?

3 But of this later on. I am only sounding you now to see in what spirit you take it. For if you are angry and annoyed, I shall have more to say, and shall insist upon your being reinstated in that school of philosophy, out of which you have been ousted "by violence and an armed force." In this formula the words "within this year" are not usually added; so even if it is now two or three years since, bewitched by the blandishments of Pleasure, you sent a notice of divorce to Virtue, I am free to act as I like. And yet to whom am I talking? To you, the most gallant gentleman in the world, who, ever since you set foot in the forum, have done nothing but what bears every mark of the most impressive distinction. Why, in that very school you have selected I apprehend there is more vitality than I should have supposed, if only because it has your approval. "How did the whole subject occur to you?" you will say. Because I had nothing else to write. About politics I can write nothing, for I do not care to write what I feel.

## Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 1:38 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

As to the arising of desires (thoughts?) there is of course also the Epicurean theory of images:

You bring up an interesting question with that parenthetical "thoughts?" 😊

As to "images," yes, that would substantiate an external stimuli for most/many of our desires (thoughts?). So maybe modern Epicureans can take that idea of external stimuli affecting our thoughts, memories, etc. as canonical?

As to the actual mechanism of the external stimuli, I take the concept of the images/eidolon/spectres as an historical curiosity and pre-scientific idea. We know there aren't streams of atoms being generated as films impacting our minds. I'm pretty confident saying "know" there, too. But the idea of external stimuli impacting our thoughts, vision, hearing, smells, etc., etc. Oh, yeah. That's definitely a thing.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 7, 2022 at 2:16 PM

I'm inclined to think of hope and desire as degrees of the same thing. For a pop culture reference, consider the Ted Lasso episode "The Hope That Kills You". Any sports fan hopes that their team wins, but isn't that really a desire? And in that case, even a vain desire as they have no control over the outcome.

Likewise, do I desire world peace or hope for it?

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 7, 2022 at 2:23 PM

BTW post #36 is a great start toward pinning down the details of desires v feelings!

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## Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 2:42 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoceus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I'm inclined to think of hope and desire as degrees of the same thing

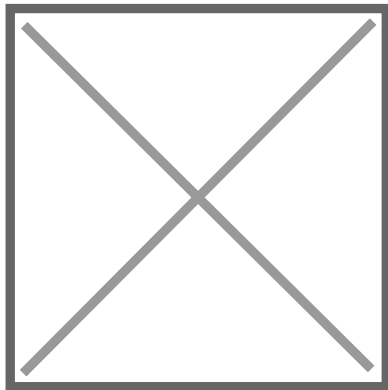
I agree they're related, but I'm thinking they're not degrees but species of the same genus.

But of course that begs the question: What genus?

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**Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 4:44 PM**

Here may be an interesting paper:



[Emotions in Plato and Aristotle](#)

Emotions in Plato and Aristotle

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

Sigh... It seems it may be instructive to read Aristotle's 2 Ethics: Nichomachean and Eudemian. It may need interesting to see how he categorized the pathē and what subdivisions he came up with. Even if Epicurus didn't agree with him in all things, Aristotle and Plato had a huge impact on Greek thought.

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**Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2022 at 4:55 PM**

Just for clarity the correct link to post number 36 is: [RE: Episode One Hundred Thirty Eight - Letter to Menoecus 5 - Pleasure Part One](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoecus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

It's not obvious how to do that.... to get the direct link click on the post number at the top right, and you get a popup box. One of the entries is "permalink" and you can click on the "copy" icon to copy the link directly into your clipboard, where it is then easy to paste.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2022 at 5:00 PM**

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

We know there aren't streams of atoms being generated as films impacting our minds. I'm pretty confident saying "know" there, too.

I am less confident, and think that we may eventually find particles flows that we don't currently know about, but I don't intend to get distracted on trying to explore that. I have enough to do exploring for intelligent space "gods" 😊

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### **Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 5:36 PM**

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

do I desire world peace or hope for it?

Excellent question! Hmmm...

I guess I would ask if you actually expect world peace to happen. Do you have an expectation that will actually occur? Or do you want it to happen with no real expectation that it will occur? If the former, I would call that hope/expectation/confidence. If the latter, I would call that a desire.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of September 7, 2022 at 5:43 PM**

Sadly, I don't. But I *hope* that it does.

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## Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 5:46 PM

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Sadly, I don't. But I *hope* that it does.

Well played there 😊

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## Post by “reneliza” of September 7, 2022 at 7:52 PM

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

#### Quote

From that table above, desire (epithymia) is a feeling of something that results in some pleasure. The opposite of desire is fear (phobos) which appears to be a feeling repelling against something that leads to pain.

I'm not sure I can get on board with the underlined part above. Lucian opposes fear to *hope*, which I think is nearer the mark;

#### Quote

And from this point, as Thucydides might say, the war takes its beginning. These ambitious scoundrels were quite devoid of scruples, and they had now joined forces; it could not escape their penetration that human life is under the absolute dominion of two mighty principles, fear and hope (ἐλπίδος καὶ φόβου) and that anyone who can make these serve his ends may be sure of a rapid fortune.

Which drives me on to my next (tentative) conclusion--that fear and hope are both *kinds* of desire. Desire is everything that happens when you see things as they are, and wish that they were different. When unscrupulous scoundrels prey on hope and fear, they prey on desire.

And now for the tricky part--if I defend my thesis that desire presents as a feeling of pain, how do I avoid the path that Cassius is rightly concerned about? In truth I don't

think there's a real problem here, because I don't think that pain is necessarily "bad" or "evil". If I lean against a hot stove, I ought to be thankful that nature has furnished a biological alarm system warning me to move quickly, or risk serious injury. Rocks and gods and corpses can get by without pain, but not me--I need pain in order to go on living. Some rare people don't experience pain, and are at high risk for an early or sudden death;

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congenital\\_insensitivity\\_to\\_pain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congenital_insensitivity_to_pain)

#### Quote

Congenital insensitivity to pain (CIP), also known as congenital analgesia, is one or more extraordinarily rare conditions in which a person cannot feel (and has never felt) physical pain.[1] The conditions described here are separate from the HSAN group of disorders, which have more specific signs and cause. Because feeling physical pain is vital for survival, CIP is an extremely dangerous condition.[1] It is common for people with the condition to die in childhood due to injuries or illnesses going unnoticed.[1][2] Burn injuries are among the more common injuries.

So I don't want to lose the sensation of pain. I also very generally don't want to *experience* the sensation of pain--it's necessary, and very natural, but it doesn't feel good--I'd rather experience continuous pleasure.

I think it's like that with desire. I understand that I have a 2 or 3 pound mammalian brain, and that, having that, I am driven almost constantly by the desire for things that are likewise desired by nearly all other mammals--the desire for food, water, shelter, warmth, sex, rest, etc. In addition to these are the particularly human desires, cultivated by things like community engagement, culture, society, economics, etc.

I cannot fulfill all of my desires. Moreover, Epicurus recognized a tendency in us to develop new desires when we have worn out or satisfied the old ones. If desire *is* a kind of pain, as I argue, and if I cannot fulfill *all* of my desires, the question naturally arises as to what I should do about them. It is by no means obvious or self-evident that, because desire is a kind of pain, the only thing left to do is to spurn desire, suppress it, condemn it, or bury it in a hole. I have basically four options; I can try to fulfill them all, and inevitably fail. I can spit contempt on them all, and probably end up dead sooner than later. I can proceed more or less reactively and without a plan, satisfying the easy desires as they pass and seldom reaching far for the difficult ones. Or I can develop and establish a plan of choice and avoidance, with the goal of maximizing pleasurable

outcomes over the course of a whole human life. Some desires will have to be put by; some will have to be vigorously rejected; some will be indulged for the sake of pleasure, and some other few will be made into something like a life's ambition--the desire which, well-chosen, will become the theme of a life well-lived.

Can we expect such an outcome from desire, if desire is a kind of pain? Why not? Pain is not nature's moral or judicial punishment--pain, like pleasure, is one of nature's guide-posts. Desire and pain direct us toward lives of pleasure and remembrance--the happy memory of all that we have come to enjoy in our lives. If there is an opposite to desire, then let that be it.

Display More

This is a really interesting topic and basically I agree with everything Joshua says here. I think "desire" must be a lack of something good (or at least something I perceive as good), and given that we're using pretty broad definitions of "pleasure" and "pain" here, that any lack must be a pain.

Hunger is a desire for food, and I think it is clearly a pain, even though it's one so easily satisfied for me that I rarely get to the point of actually registering the lack as pain.

I am interested to look more into the neuro side of things though. There is some neurological overlap between the experience of physical and emotional pain (and of course emotional pain can be manifested as physical symptoms) but I'm not sure how desire might register. I would also expect hope to be entirely different, but I'm interested to see if any studies have been done looking into any of these things

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said that all emotions derive from fear and love. I'm wondering if gratitude might be an inverse of fear. Instead of pain from worrying about how things are, it's a pleasure from appreciating how things are.

Also I just saw there's a few more pages so sorry if I'm repeating others!

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## Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2022 at 8:03 PM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

I think "desire" must be a lack of something good (or at least something I perceive as good), and given that we're using pretty broad definitions of "pleasure" and "pain" here, that any lack must be a pain.

Reneliza would you say that your sentence there boils down to "all desire is painful?" Would that cause you any issue to embrace that as a sweeping general statement?

---

## Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2022 at 8:07 PM

Maybe we ought to be considering the dictionary definitions of "desire" today, and also follow Don's lead and take a position on what we think the word meant exactly to Epicurus. Otherwise we are likely to never gain much clarity.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/desire>

# desire

**verb** [ T not continuous ] • formal

us  /dɪˈzaɪr/ UK  /dɪˈzaɪə/

---

**desire verb** [T not continuous] (WANT)

---

**C1**

**to want something, especially strongly:**

- *I desire only to be left in peace.*
- *The hotel had everything you could possibly desire.*
- *What does her Ladyship desire me **to** do/desire **of** me?*
- [+ to infinitive] *The president desires **to** meet the new prime minister.*

---

## Post by "reneliza" of September 7, 2022 at 8:14 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoceus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

### [Quote from reneliza](#)

I think "desire" must be a lack of something good (or at least something I perceive as good), and given that we're using pretty broad definitions of "pleasure" and "pain" here, that any lack must be a pain.

Reneliza would you say that your sentence there boils down to "all desire is painful?"  
Would that cause you any issue to embrace that as a sweeping general statement?

Yes, I would agree with that, but with the understanding that some desires are painful at the level of noon-time hunger after a 9AM breakfast, and some are painful like losing a limb.

However - I do think I'm defining "desire" here as I do in everyday English, and it seems to likely be different than what Epicurus meant. At the same time, I'm defining pleasure and pain as I understand them from a broad Epicurean point of view and that mix-and-match may be complicating things. I don't have a desire for needs that are already met, only for things I'm lacking, and I'm not sure that's what he meant for this concept. I don't desire housing because I already have it. But if I was outside in a downpour, I would have a desire for shelter.

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## **Post by "reneliza" of September 7, 2022 at 8:27 PM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Maybe we ought to be considering the dictionary definitions of "desire" today, and also follow Don's lead and take a position on what we think the word meant exactly to Epicurus. Otherwise we are likely to never gain much clarity.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/desire>

# desire

**verb** [ T not continuous ] • formal

us  /dɪˈzaɪr/ UK  /dɪˈzaɪəʃ/

---

**desire verb** [ T not continuous ] (WANT)

---

**C1**

**to want something, especially strongly:**

- *I desire only to be left in peace.*
- *The hotel had everything you could possibly desire.*
- *What does her Ladyship desire me **to** do/desire **of** me?*
- [+ to infinitive ] *The president desires **to** meet the new prime minister.*

well we crossposted but yes this corresponds well with my last post. I did also consult m-w.com before I posted haha

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## Post by “reneliza” of September 7, 2022 at 8:38 PM

Having again consulted Merriam Webster, I think I view Epicurean "desire" as more closely akin to "concern" or "consideration" or even "interest" (noting that "concern" obviously has a negative connotation in most people's minds as a type of worry so it wouldn't be best for communication)

The difference to me is that a desire must necessarily be unmet. Once it's met, the desire goes away. But a consideration doesn't go away when it's met, it just isn't really at the forefront anymore. There are other considerations that are more important or interesting at the moment, due to being unmet.

### **Interest:**

1.b. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interest>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoceus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

Quote

**1a:** a feeling that accompanies or causes special attention to something or someone : [CONCERN](#)

**b:** something or someone that arouses such attention

**Consideration:**

2.a. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consideration>

Quote

**2a:** a matter weighed or taken into account when formulating an opinion or plan

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**Post by “Don” of September 7, 2022 at 10:18 PM**

In reading the last few posts on desire being associated with pain, I personally find it disturbing to think my life would be motivated by pain. Desires are motivating factors. Maybe not the only ones and I admit I need to think about this more. But desires motivate us to take action. If desires are initiated by pain, then is my life motivated by pain?

I would rather think my life is motivated by an appetite to move toward pleasure. I realize that could simply be rephrased as "to move away from pain" to me it's a matter of emphasis and/or perspective. Am I concentrated on the pleasure or the pain?

All that said, Epicurus did write:

*By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.*

I'm still not convinced that desire (epithymia/ orexis) necessarily involves pain but I'm not saying I have a cogent alternative at this point.

---

**Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2022 at 11:10 PM**

Don has articulated my concern very well. To consider all desire to be intrinsically linked to pain has to be overbroad. It cannot be true both that all pleasure is good but that all desire for

pleasure not currently in our possession is bad.

Looking for additional text references I see this fragment below from Diogenes of Oinoanda. Check the underlined part: which implies to me that the focus - the "roots of all evil" - are not "desires in general" but only those which "*outrun the limits fixed by nature.*"

I think most all of us are already in agreement that desires for things prohibited by nature (eternal life for example) are desires that are by nature harmful. But desiring those pleasures *that do not exceed the limits fixed by nature* leaves a huge freeway for a spectrum of desires for pleasure which are not only beneficial but also either not intrinsically painful or are well worth the pain they require. To consider for example the excitement of children waiting for Christmas morning to receive their presents to be a state in which they are in pain would I think a highly inverted way of looking at the ultimate reality.

"Outrunning the limits fixed by nature" is a good phrase that helps shift the focus away from the simple observation that we do not yet have the object of our desire to a focus on what we would naturally expect a practical person like Epicurus to focus on: whether the desire is ultimately obtainable, and at what (if any) cost in pain.

Fr. 34

... reasoning ... [of happiness] ..... [is ... hope, after selection of these], and cure of erring emotions. So where, I say, the danger is great, so also is the fruit. Here we must turn aside these fallacious arguments on the grounds that they are insidious and insulting and contrived, by means of terminological ambiguity, to [lead] wretched human beings [astray] ..... [let us] not [avoid every pain that is present, and let us not choose every pleasure, as the many always do. Each person must employ reasoning,] since he [will not always achieve immediate success: just as] exertion (?) [often] involves one [gain at the beginning and] certain [others as time passes by], so it is also with [experiencing pleasure;] for sowings of seeds do [not] bring [the same benefit] to the sower but we see some seeds very quickly germinating [and bearing fruit and others taking longer] ..... of pleasures and [pains] ..... [pleasure].

And so the ..... [are] ..... If ..... [prudence.]

Let us now [investigate] how life is to be made pleasant for us both in states and in actions.

Let us first discuss states, keeping an eye on the point that, when the emotions which disturb the soul are removed, those which produce pleasure enter into it to take their place.

Well, what are the disturbing emotions? [They are] fears —of the gods, of death, and of [pains]— and, besides [these], desires that [outrun] the limits fixed by nature. These are the roots of all evils, and, [unless] we cut them off, [a multitude] of evils will grow [upon] us.

## Post by “Godfrey” of September 8, 2022 at 1:14 AM

I'd like to propose again that a desire is not a pain, but it may produce pain or be a response to a pain.

To test a somewhat muddled analogy: fire is not a pain, but if you put your hand in it, it will lead to pain. Moving on from the analogy: if you keep your hand in the fire, you will have a desire (in this case a response to pain) to remove your hand from the fire. If someone offered you a large sum of money to keep your hand in the fire, the natural desire to remove your hand will be fighting with the (vain? depends on the circumstances) desire to get the money (choices and avoidances: which resultant pleasure/pain leads toward a better outcome?).

If desire is a pain, then per [PD03](#) the limit of the magnitude of pleasure would include the removal of all desire. Is this what Epicurus had in mind? Then why would he describe natural and necessary desires? Does he say somewhere that gods have no desires?

Can we even experience pleasure without desire? Certainly we can by stumbling into something pleasurable. But Epicurus is very clear that prudence is of critical importance; this is how we live our lives with intention and not by chance.

As I recall from an experiment described in the book Dopamine Nation, rats with their dopamine blocked would starve to death. They weren't motivated by the pleasure of food or by the removal of the pain of hunger, but by dopamine. So if dopamine equates to desire (does it?) then it would clearly not be a pain or a pleasure. Desire would be a stimulus to action as opposed to pleasure and pain, which serve as guides to action and results of action. (OK I'm mixing modern and ancient here)

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 8, 2022 at 1:26 AM

The concluding paragraph from the paper that [Don](#) posted previously in this thread:

*"Without separating off emotions as such, Plato and Aristotle alert us to their compositional intricacy, which involves body and mind, cognition and desire, perception and feeling. Even the differences of interpretation to which scholars are resigned focus our minds upon the complexity of the phenomena, and their resistance to over-unitary definitions. Emotions, after all, are things that we feel; at the same time, emotionally is how we often think. Discarding too simple a Socratic focus upon contents of thought, Plato and Aristotle embrace the interconnections, within the emotions, of body and soul, and of perception, imagination, feeling, and thinking. Theirs was not the last word; but, after them, there was no going back to first*

words. We should still read them, for the reason that what demands clarification in them demands clarification in itself. The questions that they bring alive for us are our questions."

In other words, we've happened upon a very juicy topic 😊

---

### **Post by "DavidN" of September 8, 2022 at 4:28 AM**

PD 26 says "All desires that do not lead to pain when they remain unsatisfied are unnecessary, but the desire is

easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to obtain or the desires seem likely to produce harm."

So not all desires produce pain, so Epicurus concept of desire was not quite so black and white.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of September 8, 2022 at 5:32 AM**

Excellent last three posts. Plus this may be my nomination for quote of the week :

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

If desire is a pain, then per [PD03](#) the limit of the magnitude of pleasure would include the removal of all desire. Is this what Epicurus had in mind? Then why would he describe natural and necessary desires? Does he say somewhere that gods have no desires?

That is an excellent observation. Also:

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

In other words, we've happened upon a very juicy topic

Yes. I cannot imagine that this topic was not a major one in antiquity. And did it not have a relatively easy explanation in which the very concept of desire is tainted with the negativity of being a pain then I cannot imagine that it would have been embraced by so many Romans.

I don't know if we have the original Greek of the phrase that Martin Ferguson Smith translates as "desires that outrun the limits fixed by nature," and it appears that the "outrun" may be Ferguson's own insertion, but after a couple hours of thought I still think that is a very useful way of looking at it. And if that is the case only the desires for things which are impossible by nature (eternal life, a personal relationship with a supernatural God, etc) are unnatural and intrinsically bad (painful because they are impossible by law of nature to fulfill) and merit to be called "roots of evil." From that perspective, even a desire for the latest iphone or a new Tesla is not "unnatural" even though the ancients never envisioned them.

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### Post by “Don” of September 8, 2022 at 6:36 AM

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

a desire for the latest iphone or a new Tesla is not "unnatural" even though the ancients never envisioned them.

Yes, that would be natural but unnecessary IF acquiring those things were within reach of one's financial and life situation. But I still think you'd have to ask yourself why you wanted them: for the Tesla, as a mode of travel, for environmental reasons, as a status symbol, etc.

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### Post by “Don” of September 8, 2022 at 7:15 AM

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

I don't know if we have the original Greek of the phrase that Martin Ferguson Smith translates as "desires that outrun the limits fixed by nature,"

[DCLP/Trismegistos 865216 = LDAB 865216](#)

πρὸς δὲ [τοῦ-]

τοῖς ἐπιθυμίαι το[ῦς]

φυσικὸς ὅρους [ἐκτρέ-]

χουσαι.

The part in brackets is filled in but makes sense [ἐκτρέ-]χουσαι and the word does mean outrun or run away from.

The ὄρους is the familiar "boundary stone" used elsewhere in Epicurean texts:

- boundary, limit, frontier, landmark
  - marking stones, stones used for inscribing legal contracts
- 

## Post by "Cassius" of September 8, 2022 at 7:28 AM

Don't let me get this thread off track with this comment about Mill thinking some pleasures are better than others vs Bentham taking an opposing view. I started a new thread for it here: [John Stuart Mill on Epicurus](#)

But I think perhaps this witticism from John Stuart Mill is relevant as to the "satisfaction" issue. Probably this is a tangent to pursue in the other thread, but the tension between "happiness" and "contentment" if he developed the argument might be interesting and worth tracking down his full statement of it. I think it is a a very bad idea and dead end to consider any ranking of pleasures as "absolute" (for everyone all the time). But if we use "better" in the relative sense of "I prefer this pleasure right now because it is more pleasing to me than another X pleasure" then I would think the point is very obvious and very relevant to the discussion of whether desiring pleasures other than the ones we hold at the current moment is painful or pleasurable or simply the natural human condition or what. If we feel desires, then at least some desires seem to be pleasurable (they are natural and I can reasonably hope to achieve them) and others painful (they are impossible and yearning for them only brings unfulfillment and pain).

### [Quote from John Stuart Mill](#)

Mill's major contribution to utilitarianism is his argument for the qualitative separation of pleasures. Bentham treats all forms of happiness as equal, whereas Mill argues that intellectual and moral pleasures (higher pleasures) are superior to more physical forms of pleasure (lower pleasures). He distinguishes between happiness and contentment, claiming that the former is of higher value than the latter, a belief wittily encapsulated in the statement that, "**it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.**"[74]

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## Post by “Joshua” of September 8, 2022 at 8:16 AM

### Quote

The ὄρουç is the familiar "boundary stone" used elsewhere in Epicurean texts:

- boundary, limit, frontier, landmark
- marking stones, stones used for inscribing legal contracts

Which came into Latin as *ora*, as used in Lucretius in phrases like "shining borders of the light". For boundary-stone he uses the phrase *Alta termina haerens*, going from memory.

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## Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 9:06 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

In reading the last few posts on desire being associated with pain, I personally find it disturbing to think my life would be motivated by pain. Desires are motivating factors. Maybe not the only ones and I admit I need to think about this more. But desires motivate us to take action. If desires are initiated by pain, then is my life motivated by pain?

I would rather think my life is motivated by an appetite to move toward pleasure. I realize that could simply be rephrased as "to move away from pain" to me it's a matter of emphasis and/or perspective. Am I concentrated on the pleasure or the pain?

All that said, Epicurus did write:

*By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.*

I'm still not convinced that desire (epithymia/ orexis) necessarily involves pain but I'm not saying I have a cogent alternative at this point.

I see the concern here, but my thought is that "moving toward pleasure" and "moving away from pain" are not just closely related concepts, but literally exactly identical. If pleasure and pain are the only two feelings, then having less of one means more than the other. The only way to remove pain is to add pleasure. The only way to add pleasure is to remove pain. There is no neutral state in between. There is no intermediary. So life can't be motivated by pleasure

without being motivated by pain as well (more of one, less of the other)

But if it's disturbing to think of being driven by a negative, then by all means say that you're motivated to move toward the pleasure found in fulfilling desire rather than ending the pain of desire. Because they're wholly equivalent, one just feels more positive because of perspective.

^ all that said, I still hold a difference between "interests" and "desires" and having unexplored interests need not be painful, except for the necessary ones like food and shelter (and yes, the ones needed for happiness, whatever those are). "Desire" in common English means to me "wanting something I don't have (yet)" but I'm not certain that Epicurus meant to be referring to something that was inherently painful when he spoke of desires. I am not at all familiar with the Greek or even if this sort of connotation existed with the language he used.

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### **Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 9:14 AM**

Confession: I don't know Greek like AT ALL so reading Don's posts is usually me trying to brute force my way through Greek words by applying what I remember from college math/engineering classes. Like "okay that's tau which is easy enough. That's sigma. That's rho so even though it looks like a p it sounds like an r. Pi sounds like p" etc... lol

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 9:24 AM**

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

I see the concern here, but my thought is that "moving toward pleasure" and "moving away from pain" are not just closely related concepts, but literally exactly identical. If pleasure and pain are the only two feelings, then having less of one means more than the other. The only way to remove pain is to add pleasure. The only way to add pleasure is to remove pain. There is no neutral state in between. There is no intermediary. So life can't be motivated by pleasure without being motivated by pain as well (more of one, less of the other)

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you're motivated to move toward the pleasure found in fulfilling desire rather than ending the pain of desire. Because they're wholly equivalent, one just feels more positive because of perspective.

I think we're seeing in this discussion the difference between (1) making a philosophically logical point vs (2) making a psychologically helpful suggestion to someone struggling with basic issues of life.

Both have their place and proper circumstance, but if we take the statement that is appropriate for one situation and try to apply it to the other, we end up with something that is confusing, disconcerting, and on the face of it "wrong."

That's exactly what I think has been done with the entire issue of the "absence of pain" passages ever since the time of Cicero. Cicero was a lawyer who opposed Epicurean theory so he intentionally used this technique to score debating points and make it appear that Epicurus was logically inconsistent. Everything that ReneLiza says in her post is logically correct as to the identity of "absence of one" being the same as "presence of the other." That logical observation is helpful and necessary in establishing that there is a limit to the quantity of pleasure - the limit is when all pain is gone. And if you're concerned about the issue "Does Pleasure Have A Limit?" because you're debating pleasure with Plato and you have to establish that pleasure does have a "boundary stone," then you're doing a great job and can feel very satisfied that you have proved your point.

But that kind of philosophical debate is not the way that normal people talk, and if you try to talk with them that way you end up confusing them and looking impractical or even a fool.

So we have to find a way to articulate this problem to people who are reading Epicurus so that they are aware of it and can therefore reason themselves out of the way of the difficulty. People need to understand that many deep issues in Epicurus are not just friendly disagreements among people of good faith who are searching for the truth, but are in fact a philosophical war. Every Epicurean needs a helmet and to be ready to fight in it.

I will never forget the second paragraph of this review from Dewitt:

MARY N. PORTER PACKER. Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics. New York, The Columbia University Press, 1938. Pp. 127. Columbia Diss.

This study is most commendable. It is clearly written and well printed, acutely reasoned and amply documented. The treatment confines itself to *De Finibus* I-II and is divided into two chapters: 1. Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Philosophy in *De Finibus* I. 2. Cicero's Critique of Epicurean Philosophy, Presented in *De Finibus* I and II. Each chapter concludes with a summary, and the text of Epicurus himself is abundantly cited. The conclusion is that Cicero failed "to understand Epicureanism as a consistently unified philosophy (p. 81)," but is acquitted of having been "deliberately and intentionally unfair (p. 119)."

It is only to this acquittal that I take exception. Every debater has the choice of arguing to reveal the truth in its entirety or of arguing to make points. The former method is adapted to the Supreme Court, the latter to a trial by jury. Cicero was a crafty old trial lawyer and he deliberately argued to make points, because he was pleading before a reading audience, which functions like a jury, and his shrewd legal mind had long discerned the vulnerability of Epicureanism before this style of attack. His attitude was that of William J. Bryan toward biological evolution, and his pleadings are comparable to a Scopes trial, but I do not believe he could have misrepresented the truth so successfully had he not understood it completely. In the Scopes trial, the crafty old lawyer was on the opposite side—Clarence Darrow.

NORMAN W. DEWITT.

VICTORIA COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO.

Cicero was a trial lawyer and in this allegations that Epicurus was being inconsistent he was intentionally misrepresenting Epicurean doctrine. Cicero had a brilliant mind and access to all the texts and Epicurean teachers and he could have chosen to explain Epicurus' viewpoint from a sympathetic and understandable "big picture" viewpoint. Instead, he chose to take these passages we are debating outside of their full context and hold them up as inconsistent and foolish.

If we aren't willing to take a stand ourselves and explain how these interpretations are misrepresenting the truth, then Cicero's arguments will continue to prevail, as they have prevailed for 2000 years already.

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**Post by "reneliza" of September 8, 2022 at 9:36 AM**

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

If desire is a pain, then per [PD03](#) the limit of the magnitude of pleasure would include the removal of all desire. Is this what Epicurus had in mind? Then why would he describe natural and necessary desires? Does he say somewhere that gods have no desires?

I would think that the pain-free ideal would be to remove all desire by meeting all desire. So the only ones that would need to be dealt with would be the ones that can't be satisfied. (or that can't be satisfied while also satisfying desires of greater importance to you)

However, it's not like all desires are being actively desired at all times, so one can certainly reach a pain-free state even with unmet desires.

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

As I recall from an experiment described in the book Dopamine Nation, rats with their dopamine blocked would starve to death. They weren't motivated by the pleasure of food or by the removal of the pain of hunger, but by dopamine. So if dopamine equates to desire (does it?) then it would clearly not be a pain or a pleasure. Desire would be a stimulus to action as opposed to pleasure and pain, which serve as guides to action and results of action. (OK I'm mixing modern and ancient here)

It's important to be really careful when talking about DA in the context of motivation because it does a lot of different things, but of course gets presented in popular media as neurochemical pleasure which is a gross misrepresentation. For example: the only disorder for which the standard course of treatment includes synthetic dopamine is Parkinson's Disease. It is dysregulated in some way in just about all mental health conditions, and current understanding is basically that it fills a lot of different roles in a lot of different circuits and we're not sure of the exact mechanism. (Some animal models for ADHD include subjects with blocked DA to simulate loss of motivation, but subjects with increased DA activity to simulate hyperactivity are ALSO used)

Anyway, I found the paper referred to here, or at least a similar one studying DA-knockout rats which states (emphasis mine) "**The feeding deficit in the rat model has been attributed to sensorimotor impairment and/or a loss of motivation to eat; however, the mechanisms have not been elucidated.** Delivery of DA agonists and antagonists to different sites in the brain has identified specific regions that influence feeding behaviors ([8](#), [9](#)), but they have not indicated where the DA action is essential. Furthermore, the genetic approach of inactivating individual genes encoding DA receptors or transporters has not revealed any striking effects on feeding behavior ([10-13](#)). Thus, the specific roles of DA in feeding remain enigmatic." <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC18425/>

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## Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 10:13 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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

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But if it's disturbing to think of being driven by a negative, then by all means say that you're motivated to move toward the pleasure found in fulfilling desire rather than ending the pain of desire. Because they're wholly equivalent, one just feels more positive because of perspective.

I think we're seeing in this discussion the difference between (1) making a philosophically logical point vs (2) making a psychologically helpful suggestion to someone struggling with basic issues of life.

Both have their place and proper circumstance, but if we take the statement that is appropriate for one situation and try to apply it to the other, we end up with something that is confusing, disconcerting, and on the face of it "wrong."

That's exactly what I think has been done with the entire issue of the "absence of pain" passages ever since the time of Cicero. Cicero was a lawyer who opposed Epicurean theory so he intentionally used this technique to score debating points and make it appear that Epicurus was logically inconsistent. Everything that Reneliza says in her post is logically correct as to the identity of "absence of one" being the same as "presence of the other." That logical observation is helpful and necessary in establishing that there is a limit to the quantity of pleasure - the limit is when all pain is gone. And if you're concerned about the issue "Does Pleasure Have A Limit?" because you're debating pleasure with Plato and you have to establish that pleasure does have a "boundary stone," then you're doing a great job and can feel very satisfied that you

have proved your point.

But that kind of philosophical debate is not the way that normal people talk, and if you try to talk with them that way you end up confusing them and looking impractical or even a fool.

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[attachment]

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If we aren't willing to take a stand ourselves and explain how these interpretations are misrepresenting the truth, then Cicero's arguments will continue to prevail, as they have prevailed for 2000 years already.

Display More

I actually completely agree! That's why I included the second paragraph there. I appreciate getting called out though when I go too far analytical. IANAL but I do have a tendency to think like one haha.

I think if you find a struggling Epicurean trying to find the true meaning of pleasure by eliminating all desire and pain and experiencing endless tranquility that explaining that pain and pleasure are mutually exhaustive and that you reduce one by increasing the other is helpful.

It's a lot easier to eliminate pain once you understand this. I am on the Epicurean subreddit and see many people trying to avoid both pain and pleasure (out of fear that pleasure will cause long term pain) and that's simply not possible. The only way to eliminate pain as they are trying to do is to move toward pleasure.

Somewhat unrelated, but I also think it's helpful to remind people that many "simple pleasures" are without question kinetic. The most classic example to "stop and smell the roses" is a sensory pleasure and therefore kinetic under any definition!

If you're talking about someone who hasn't been tainted with the Stoic interpretation of Epicureanism, it may be less important to stress this point, especially if they don't associate the word desire with pain. It certainly isn't necessary to tell them to pursue pleasure only so they can remove all pain which is the goal of life. Pleasure is always the goal.

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

To consider for example the excitement of children waiting for Christmas morning to receive their presents to be a state in which they are in pain would I think a highly inverted way of looking at the ultimate reality.

This, however, I do disagree with. (I have to find something, right? I'm a contrarian with an unnatural desire for arguing that certainly outruns the limits fixed by nature)

The pain may be worth it in the end - the pain may even make the eventual satisfaction even sweeter - but it's still a state of pain. At least, that's how I would have described it for myself. I loved surprises but only when I didn't know they were coming. Knowing a surprise was on the way was unbearable. Perhaps this is just an individual trait though which could explain why I associate desire directly with pain.

But I also find that some desires (perhaps certain kinds of desires?) not only bring pain of wanting, but also that once they're fulfilled, the pleasure isn't nearly what I expected and I end up more likely in a state of disappointment than satisfaction.

"This is because we are genuinely persuaded that men who are able to do without luxury are the best able to enjoy luxury when it is available."

My understanding of this line is that partaking in a pleasure without desiring or expecting it makes us more likely to appreciate it and to gain more from it.

The Letter to Menoikeus also states that "the storm of the soul" can't be settled until we no longer have need to go looking for something which we lack.

I have read through the whole thread at this point, but I have to admit I'm still not sure what different kind of definition/interpretation other people are using. How is having an unmet longing NOT painful? I'd love to figure out where the misunderstanding between the two sides is occurring.

## Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 10:17 AM

Having just looked up [PD26](#) (which I've read but then forgot) in preparation for next week, I'm more certain than ever that Epicurus was working with a different definition of desire than I am, since he says that the unnecessary desires cause no pain when unmet!

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 10:28 AM

### [Quote from reneliza](#)

Having just looked up [PD26](#) (which I've read but then forgot) in preparation for next week, I'm more certain than ever that Epicurus was working with a different definition of desire than I am, since he says that the unnecessary desires cause no pain when unmet!

Great observation!

Yes let me place that thought in this thread. Given that by coincidence we are taking up [PD26](#) at 8:30 PM eastern next Wednesday night, let's specifically invite everyone here to attend if they can so that we can have a major "DESIRE" extravaganza!

Thread

### [September 14, 2022 - Epicurean Zoom Gathering Topic - PD26 - "DESIRE"](#)

Bailey: 26. Of desires, all that do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary, but involve a craving which is easily dispelled when the object is hard to procure, or they seem likely to produce harm.

\*\*ΤΩΝ ΕΠΙΘΥΜΙΩΝ \*\*\*\*ΟΣΑΙ ΜΗ ΕΠ ΑΛΓΟΥΝ ΕΠΑΝΑΓΟΥΣΙΝ \*\*\*\*ΕΑΝ\*\*

\*\*ΜΗ ΣΥΜΠΛΗΡΩΣΙΝ \*\*\*\*ΟΥΚ ΕΙΣΙΝ ΑΝΑΓΚΑΙΑΙ \*\*\*\*ΑΛΛ' \*\*

\*\*ΕΥΔΙΑΧΥΤΟΝ \*\*\*\*ΤΗΝ ΟΡΕΞΙΝ ΕΧΟΥΣΙΝ \*\*\*\*ΟΤΑΝ ΔΥΣΠΟΡΙΣΤΩΝ\*\*

\*\*[Η] Η ΒΛΑΒΗΣ ΑΠΕΡΓΑΣΤΙΚΑΙ ΔΟΞΩΣΙΝ \*\*\*\*ΕΙΝΑΙ. \*\*

“All desires that lead to no pain when they...



Cassius

September 8, 2022 at 10:27 AM

\*\*ΤΩΝ ΕΠΙΘΥΜΙΩΝ \*\*\*\*ΟΣΑΙ ΜΗ ΕΠ ΑΛΓΟΥΝ ΕΠΑΝΑΓΟΥΣΙΝ \*\*\*\*ΕΑΝ\*\*

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Bailey: 26. Of desires, all that do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary, but involve a craving which is easily dispelled when the object is hard to procure, or they seem likely to produce harm.

“All desires that lead to no pain when they remain ungratified are unnecessary, and the longing is easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to procure or when the desires seem likely to produce harm.” Yonge (1853)

“Some desires lead to no pain when they remain ungratified. All such desires are unnecessary, and the longing is easily got rid of when the thing desired is difficult to procure or when the desires seem likely to produce harm.” Hicks (1910)

“All such desires as lead to no pain when they remain ungratified are unnecessary, and the longing is easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to procure or when the desires seem likely to produce harm.” Hicks (1925)

“Of desires, all that do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary, but involve a craving which is easily dispelled, when the object is hard to procure or they seem likely to produce harm.” Bailey (1926)

“Those desires that do not bring pain if they are not satisfied are not necessary; and they are easily thrust aside whenever to satisfy them appears difficult or likely to cause injury.” Geer (1964)

“Those desires that do not lead to pain, if they are not fulfilled, are not necessary. They involve a longing that is easily dispelled, whenever it is difficult to fulfill the desires or they appear likely to lead to harm.” O'Connor (1993)

“The desires which do not bring a feeling of pain when not fulfilled are not necessary; but the desire for them is easy to dispel when they seem to be hard to achieve or to produce harm.” Inwood & Gerson (1994)

“All desires which create no pain when unfulfilled are not necessary; such desires may easily be dispelled when they are seen as difficult to fulfill or likely to produce harm.” Anderson (2004)

“Of desires, those which do not bring one to pain if they remain unfulfilled are not necessary; such desires are actually accompanied by appetites that are easily defused: indeed, [this is evidently what happens] when it is thought difficult to find the means to satisfy [unnecessary desires] or when the desires themselves are thought to be productive of harm.” Makridis (2005)

“The desires that do not bring pain when they go unfulfilled are not necessary; indeed they are easy to reject if they are hard to achieve or if they seem to produce harm.” Saint-Andre (2008)

“All desires that do not lead to physical pain if not satisfied are unnecessary, and involve cravings that are easily resolved when they appear to entail harm or when the object of desire is hard to get.” Strodach (2012)

“All desires that do not lead to pain when unfulfilled are unnecessary, and such cravings are easily dissolved when the desired objects are hard to procure or are thought to do harm.” Mensch (2018)

“Any desires that do not lead to bodily pain if they are not fulfilled are not necessary; rather, the motivation they supply is readily dispelled whenever we believe they are difficult to satisfy or liable to result in harm.” White (2021)

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 10:38 AM

### [Quote from reneliza](#)

It's a lot easier to eliminate pain once you understand this. I am on the Epicurean subreddit and see many people trying to avoid both pain and pleasure (out of fear that pleasure will cause long term pain), and that's simply not possible. The only way to eliminate pain as they are trying to do is to move toward pleasure.

I think that is very close to identifying the real issue we are working to combat here. That's a very widespread notion. Why love (desire!) anything or anyone when you know that you could lose them or they could die before you do and cause you all sorts of pain? This is the topic Frances Wright tackled in Chapter 10. I am not sure she is correct to argue that we would not appreciate the good without the bad, but there is a lot to think about starting with **"Should we, then, to avoid the evil, forego the good?"**

### [Quote from Frances Wright](#)

But there is yet a pain, which the wisest and the best of men cannot escape; that all of us, my sons, have felt, or have to feel. Do not your hearts whisper it? Do you not tell me, that in death there is yet a sting? That ere he aim at us, he may level the beloved of our soul? The father, whose tender care hath reared our infant minds — the brother, whom the same breast hath nourished, and the same roof sheltered, with whom, side by side, we have grown like two plants by a river, sucking life from the same fountain and strength from the same sun — the child whose gay prattle delights our ears, or whose opening understanding fixes our hopes — the friend of our choice, with whom we have exchanged hearts, and shared all our pains and pleasures, whose eye hath reflected the tear of sympathy, whose hand hath smoothed the couch of sickness. Ah! my sons, here indeed is a pain — a pain that cuts into the soul. There are masters that will tell you otherwise; who will tell you that it is unworthy of a man to mourn even here. But such, my sons, speak not the truth of experience or philosophy, but the subtleties of sophistry and pride. He who feels not the loss, hath never felt the possession. He who knows not the grief, hath never known the joy. See the price of a friend in the duties we render him, and the sacrifices we make to him, and which, in making, we count not sacrifices, but pleasures. We sorrow for his sorrow; we supply his wants, or, if we cannot, we share them. We follow him to exile. We close ourselves in his prison; we soothe him in sickness; we strengthen him in death: nay, if it be possible, we throw down our life for his. Oh! What a treasure is that for which we do so much! And is it forbidden to us to mourn its loss? If it be, the power is not with us to obey.

**Should we, then, to avoid the evil, forego the good?** Shall we shut love from our hearts, that we may not feel the pain of his departure? No; happiness forbids it. Experience forbids it. Let him who hath laid on the pyre the dearest of his soul, who hath washed the urn with the bitterest tears of grief — let him say if his heart hath ever formed the wish that it had never shrined within it him whom he now deplores. Let him say if the pleasures of the sweet communion of his former days doth not still live in his remembrance. If he love not to recall the image of the departed, the tones of his voice, the words of his discourse, the deeds of his kindness, the amiable virtues of his life. If, while he weeps the loss of his friend, he smiles not to think that he once possessed him. He who knows not friendship, knows not the purest pleasure of earth. Yet if fate deprive us of it, though we grieve, we do not sink; Philosophy is still at hand, and she upholds us with fortitude. And think, my sons, perhaps in the very evil we dread, there is a good; perhaps the very uncertainty of the tenure gives it value in our eyes; perhaps all our pleasures take their zest from the known possibility of their interruption. What were the glories of the sun, if we knew not the gloom of darkness? What the refreshing breezes of morning and evening, if we felt not the fervors of noon? Should we value the lovely-flower, if it bloomed eternally; or the luscious fruit, if it hung always on the bough? Are not the smiles of the heavens more beautiful in contrast with their frowns, and the delights of the seasons more grateful from their vicissitudes? Let us then be

slow to blame nature, for perhaps in her apparent errors there is hidden a wisdom. Let us not quarrel with fate, for perhaps in our evils lie the seeds of our good. Were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health. Were our life eternal, our tranquillity might sink into inaction. Were our friendship not threatened with interruption, it might want much of its tenderness. This, then, my sons, is our duty, for this is our interest and our happiness; to seek our pleasures from the hands of the virtues, and for the pain which may befall us, to submit to it with patience, or bear up against it with fortitude. *To walk, in short, through life innocently and tranquilly; and to look on death as its gentle termination, which it becomes us to meet with ready minds, neither regretting the past, nor anxious for the future.*"

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### Post by "Don" of September 8, 2022 at 12:07 PM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

Confession: I don't know Greek like AT ALL so reading Don's posts is usually me trying to brute force my way through Greek words by applying what I remember from college math/engineering classes.

[Quote from reneliza](#)

It's important to be really careful when talking about DA in the context of motivation

Okay, D probably stands for dopamine since we're talking about that. But the A must be an abbreviation for something... 😊

See, it can work both ways 😊

---

### Post by "reneliza" of September 8, 2022 at 12:24 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from reneliza](#)

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Okay, D probably stands for dopamine since we're talking about that. But the A must be an abbreviation for something... 😊

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DA together is dopamine! (not sure why it's abbreviated like that but I should have clarified!!)

Also in case it comes up elsewhere, DAT is Dopamine Transporter which is INVERSELY correlated with DA activity (DAT is responsible for dopamine reuptake, which means sucking it back up into the pre-synaptic neuron before the neurochemical message can be conveyed.)

DAT is important in motivation circuits and gets brought up a lot, but people can be confused when they find higher DAT activity means lower apparent motivation

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### **Post by “Martin” of September 8, 2022 at 2:50 PM**

DA: 3,4-dihydroxyphenethylamine (dopamine)

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### **Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 4:17 PM**

#### [Quote from Martin](#)

DA: 3,4-dihydroxyphenethylamine (dopamine)

Yes but why only the D and A??

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 8, 2022 at 6:00 PM

### [Quote from reneliza](#)

How is having an unmet longing NOT painful? I'd love to figure out where the misunderstanding between the two sides is occurring.

Right now there's some pineapple in our refrigerator, which I'm going to snack on in a little while. I'm experiencing a desire for some of that pineapple, which I don't experience as a pain but as an anticipation of a future pleasure. Before that, however, I desire to take a nap; I'm experiencing this desire as a reaction to the pain caused by a bad night's sleep last night.

For me, desire is intricately tied to both pain and pleasure; it can have elements of either or both. My practical Epicurean take is that desire provides the stimulus to action, while pleasure/pain provides guidance in how to act. Practice involves being aware of and responsive to all of these: desire, pleasure, and pain.

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 6:23 PM

It is unclear to me exactly how Godfrey and I ended up on close to the same page, but it appears to me that is the direction things are taking.

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

For me, desire is intricately tied to both pain and pleasure; it can have elements of either or both.

Just to keep things lively, I would carry that forward and say "*For me, desire is intricately tied to life itself.*"

If you don't actively have desires, you aren't alive, and I would analogize the absolute minimizing of all desire to being on the very doorstep of death - such a person might still be breathing and conscious, but if he has no desire of any kind, not even for the continuation of life, then that is what I would expect to observe in a hospital who has lost the battle against some disease and who is totally ready to die. (Leaving aside for the moment that such a person might indeed desire death.)

That's why it is essential to establish the initial presumption that not all desire is inherently painful and something to be minimized.

So therefore I would say that the [Epicurean gods](#) have desires as well -- all of which are presumably met. Which is not to say that [Epicurean gods](#) are omnipotent and can do anything and everything, but that they are smart enough not to have desires for things which are impossible by nature.

This is my vote for best summary statement so far:

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

For me, desire is intricately tied to both pain and pleasure; it can have elements of either or both. My practical Epicurean take is that desire provides the stimulus to action, while pleasure/pain provides guidance in how to act. Practice involves being aware of and responsive to all of these: desire, pleasure, and pain.

Except I would delete the "for me" and render it more firmly something like:

#### Quote from "Collective Genius" of the EpicureanFriends Forum

*Desire is intricately tied to both pain and pleasure; it can have elements of either or both. Desire provides the stimulus to action, while pleasure/pain provides guidance in how to act. Epicurean practice involves being aware of and responsive to all of these: desire, pleasure, and pain. The advice of Epicurus to consider whether desires are natural and necessary is a call to consider the full results of pursuing any desire so as to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, not a call to minimize all desire.*

*Edit: I checked Don's post 36 to see if there is anything in that list that needs to be added to such a really simple summary statement. On first glance I don't know that there is. There are some important points in 36 about voluntary vs automatic but I am not sure those really fit in addressing the main point, which is the issue of how to avoid the implication that ALL desire needs to be avoided/minimized. However if Don or someone sees something pithy to add, please say so. I would eventually like to take a paragraph like the above and add it to the summary outline on page one. We can link to this thread for the full discussion of the extra details of the varying opinions. Link to post 36: [RE: Episode One Hundred Thirty Eight - Letter to Menoecus 5 - Pleasure Part One](#)*

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**Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 6:33 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoecus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

I know Epicurus speaks about remembering past pleasures. Does he ever say anything about thinking ahead to future pleasure as a form of pleasure? (Or anything remotely related)

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 6:34 PM

### [Quote from reneliza](#)

Does he ever say anything about thinking ahead to future pleasure as a form of pleasure? (Or anything remotely related)

I am thinking that the passages about "confident expectation of continuance" might be applicable, and there is also the passage in Diogenes of Oinoanda about the sequence in which pleasure comes. I started to quote that earlier but will add that here in a moment:

Not really sure this applies directly, because he is talking about cause and effect, but it MIGHT be stretchable to cover the point. Probably better to go to the "Confident expectation" passages.....

### [Fr.33](#)

... such virtues ... pleasure ... and [of virtues] ... feels [much] pain ... the evil [is] ... [from] all virtues ... apart from tension ... pleasure, but these quibblers admit ... often found not ..., [and Zeno] himself [proposes] the opinion ....., just as if he means virtue when he has said «pleasure,» and that men run to them. And again elsewhere having forgotten this hunger ([for they did] not [say that] .....) ... of this ... so that ... it ... in no way .... is able, as these people lay it down, like a bait, for all human beings, to draw them, like birds or fish, open-mouthed to the names of the virtues, and sometimes ..... itself ... [illusions (?). And you are] not ashamed, [you] wretched people, [of contradicting both yourselves and] one another: [for indeed, employing puerile] wit, [you reject] pleasure, while cleverly agreeing [with us about sensation], so that you not [prevented from] passing through [an area in safety], when you venture to climb crags.

Well now, I want to deflect also the error that, along with the feeling of self-love, has you in its grip —an error that, more than any other, further inflates your doctrine as ignorant. The error is this: [not] all causes in things precede their effects, even if the majority do, but some of them precede their effects, others [coincide with] them, and others follow them.

Examples of causes that precede are cautery and surgery saving life: in these cases extreme pain must be borne, and it is after this that pleasure quickly follows.

Examples of coincident causes are [solid] and liquid nourishment and, in addition to these, [sexual acts:] we do not eat [food] and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we drink wine and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we emit semen and experience pleasure afterwards; rather the action brings about these pleasures for us immediately, without awaiting the future.

[As for causes that follow, an example is expecting] to win praise after death: although men experience pleasure now because there will be a favourable memory of them after they have gone, nevertheless the cause of the pleasure occurs later.

Now you, being unable to mark off these distinctions, and being unaware that the virtues have a place among the causes that coincide with their effects (for they are borne along with [pleasure]), go completely astray.]

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## Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 6:40 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

It is unclear to me exactly how Godfrey and I ended up on close to the same page, but it appears to me that is the direction things are taking.

### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

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Just to keep things lively, I would carry that forward and say "*For me, desire is intricately tied to life itself.*"

If you don't actively have desires, you aren't alive, and I would analogize the absolute minimizing of all desire to being on the very doorstep of death - such a person might still be breathing and conscious, but if he has no desire of any kind, not even for the continuation of life, then that is what I would expect to observe in a hospital who has lost the battle against some disease and who is totally ready to die. (Leaving aside for the moment that such a person might indeed desire death.)

That's why it is essential to establish the initial presumption that not all desire is inherently painful and something to be minimized.

So therefore I would say that the [Epicurean gods](#) have desires as well -- all of which are presumably met. Which is not to say that [Epicurean gods](#) are omnipotent and can do anything and everything, but that they are smart enough not to have desires for things which are impossible by nature.

This is my vote for best summary statement so far:

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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Except I would delete the "for me" and render it more firmly something like:

Quote from "Collective Genius" of the EpicureanFriends Forum

*Desire is intricately tied to both pain and pleasure; it can have elements of either or both. Desire provides the stimulus to action, while pleasure/pain provides guidance in how to act. Epicurean practice involves being aware of and responsive to all of these: desire, pleasure, and pain. The advice of Epicurus to consider whether desires are natural and necessary is a call to consider the full results of pursuing any desire so as to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, not a call to minimize all desire.*

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I can happily agree with all of this if I just swap out the word "desire" for "interest" or "motivation" (although technically motivation is WHY you want to do a thing, not just what you

want to do - I think it still works here and is sometimes even more useful to know) but I still get hung up on the one word.

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### Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 6:41 PM

This is Torquatus rather than Epicurus but might well be relevant. I think there are others.....

(1) Some have denied that pleasures affecting our friends are in themselves to be desired by us in the same degree as we desire our own pleasures. This doctrine is thought by some critics to undermine the foundations of friendship; however, its supporters defend their position, and in my opinion have no difficulty in making good their ground. They argue that friendship can no more be sundered from pleasure than can the virtues, which we have discussed already. A solitary, friendless life must be beset by secret dangers and alarms. **Hence reason itself advises the acquisition of friends; their possession gives confidence, and a firmly rooted hope of winning pleasure.** And just as hatred, jealousy, and contempt are hindrances to pleasure, so friendship is the most trustworthy preserver and also creator of pleasure alike for our friends and for ourselves. It affords us enjoyment in the present, and it inspires us with hopes for the near and distant future.

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### Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 6:47 PM

There is an awful lot of discussion of "confidence" but not all of it would clearly be applicable. This one jumps out at me first as applicable - is this not a current thought of future pleasure?

VS34. It is not so much our friends' help that helps us, as it is the confidence of their help.

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### Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 6:49 PM

[Quote from reneliza](#)

I can happily agree with all of this if I just swap out the word "desire" for "interest" or "motivation" (although technically motivation is WHY you want to do a thing, not just what you want to do - I think it still works here and is sometimes even more useful to know) but I still get hung up on the one word.

Can you explain that a little further? We probably need to focus on using the word "desire" since that is the word with the explosive connotations that people are used to debating about, but I would like to be sure I understand your concern.

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### Post by “Don” of September 8, 2022 at 7:02 PM

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

VS34. It is not so much our friends' help that helps us, as it is the confidence of their help.

I was expecting elpis "hope" for confidence here but it ends up being pisteōs "trust" (related to "epistemology" ie, study of what you can trust)

I'm getting hung up on the differences and shades of meaning of:

Desire

Anticipation

Hope

Want

and all the similar words both in English and Greek that have to do with looking forward to something pleasurable (or wanting to escape something painful)

It seems to me at least that there's a distinction that should be important. What does it mean to desire something as opposed to just wanting or anticipating or having confidence in something.

Desire has such a sexual connotation now in English it's hard to disassociate it from that.

Anyway, that's where my head is currently.

## Post by “reneliza” of September 8, 2022 at 7:22 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

There is an awful lot of discussion of "confidence" but not all of it would clearly be applicable. This one jumps out at me first as applicable - is this not a current thought of future pleasure?

VS34. It is not so much our friends' help that helps us, as it is the confidence of their help.

If I understand it properly (that it's not the actual help provided but just the certainty that help WILL BE provided that is helpful), then it's definitely related.

But to go all Ciceronian, I think that technically since the CONFIDENCE is occurring in the present moment, and that it is the actual source of the pleasure, I'm not sure that it counts as a future pleasure.

Seriously though, I do think it's the exact type of thing I was looking for - a pleasure gained from the thought of something happening in the future that isn't actually tied to whether it happens or not. It makes a possibility for disappointment, but as long as your confidence is founded, the risk is worth the pleasure to be gained from trusting in your friends' support.

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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

I can happily agree with all of this if I just swap out the word "desire" for "interest" or "motivation" (although technically motivation is WHY you want to do a thing, not just what you want to do - I think it still works here and is sometimes even more useful to know) but I still get hung up on the one word.

Can you explain that a little further? We probably need to focus on using the word "desire" since that is the word with the explosive connotations that people are used to debating about, but I would like to be sure I understand your concern.

Really just what I've been saying - that I have no conception of desire that is without any pain. I don't know if it's a difference in language, or experience, or even just personality or neurotype (ie me as a kid in misery waiting for xmas presents) but it's not something I can wrap my head around. Although as you reduce the distance (in time, effort, etc...) between the desire and fulfillment, the pain can certainly be negligible.

Going to Godfrey's example (which I'm still thinking on!) - at the store yesterday I considered buying a pineapple, but didn't, and him bringing it up - that it's even already prepared! - made me wish I had some pineapple. It's not going to upset the balance of my night (or my dinner) to not have it, but it is a bit of a pain if I dwell on it. The grocery store doesn't close for an hour so I could pack up the kids in the car and go get it and then get home and peel it and core it and slice it, but that's a lot of distance between me and that pineapple, so the pain is minor, but noticeable (if I bother to notice it). If my circumstance was already prepared pineapple in the fridge, I wouldn't even notice the pain, I would just go eat the pineapple. Heck, I might not even eat it. I might just hoard it.

You may have noticed I'm not very patient (again see: xmas presents), but I also delay gratification for myself so often that I've become known for treats going bad while I wait to enjoy them. This is probably something worth examining! Perhaps the pain of desire as I experience leads me to reduce that distance as much as I can for a variety of possible desires.

Or possibly I'm a masochist.

My argument would be that desire is inherently painful but that circumstance can make the pain negligible. But you could just as easily make the claim that desire is not inherently painful but that circumstance can make it so and I don't think there's necessarily a right or wrong. But I DO necessarily think that Epicurus did not mean to refer to something that was inherently painful, as he even specified.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 8, 2022 at 7:58 PM

Quote from reneliza

I know Epicurus speaks about remembering past pleasures. Does he ever say anything about thinking ahead to future pleasure as a form of pleasure? (Or anything remotely related)

Regarding future pleasures, I think there's a passage somewhere in which Epicurus says something about the remembering of past pleasures and anticipation of future pleasures and you will live like a god among men... I thought it was in a letter or a fragment, but all I can find is this from Cicero....

Tusculan Disputations 5.95-96. *The upshot of his entire discussion of pleasure is this. He holds that pleasure itself should always be wished for and pursued for its own sake because it is pleasure, and that by the same reasoning pain should always be avoided, just because it is pain; and so the wise man will employ a principle of compensation, and will avoid pleasure if it*

*will produce a greater pain and will endure pain if it produces a greater pleasure; and that all pleasing feelings are to be referred to the mind, although they are actually judged by bodily senses. 96. As a result the body is pleased for only so long as it perceives a present pleasure, while the mind perceives a present pleasure just as much as the body does, but also foresees a pleasure which is coming in the future and does not let a past pleasure slip from its grasp. So the wise man will always have a continuous and interconnected [set of] pleasures, since the expectation of hoped-for pleasures is linked to the memory of pleasures already perceived.*

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 8:32 PM**

Excellent quote Godfrey! That is one we do not talk about much but looks very relevant.

[Quote from reneliza](#)

Really just what I've been saying - that I have no conception of desire that is without any pain

And maybe that is exactly an artifact of the corruption of the modern monotheistic world and misrepresentation of Epicurean philosophy - that you and a lot of people DONT have such a conception(?). And for that reason that may be why this point needs to be pounded home in modern Epicurean discussion.

Were you by chance raised Catholic? 😊

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### **Post by “Don” of September 8, 2022 at 8:43 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Excellent quote Godfrey! That is one we do not talk about much but looks very relevant.

[Quote from reneliza](#)

Really just what I've been saying - that I have no conception of desire that is without any pain

And maybe that is exactly an artifact of the corruption of the modern monotheistic world and misrepresentation of Epicurean philosophy - that you and a lot of people DONT have such a conception(?). And for that reason that may be why this point needs to be pounded home in modern Epicurean discussion.

Were you by chance raised Catholic? 😊

I can understand where [reneliza](#) (and [Joshua](#)) are coming from with the desire / pain paradigm. I think the perspective issue is an intriguing one: the urge to move toward pleasure vs the urge to move away from pain. They really are two sides of the same coin or mirror images or similar metaphors. The glass really is half full AND half empty at the same time.

I do want to dig into Aristotle and his emotion feeling classifications to get a handle on Greek thought at the time.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 9, 2022 at 1:10 AM

From the above linked paper "Emotions in Plato and Aristotle", discussing Aristotle: (the author uses "affections" in place of "emotions")

*"The two Ethics introduce pleasure or pain, or pleasure and pain, in order to generalize from lists of affections. Thus we read, 'By the affections I mean desire (epithumia), anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general things that are accompanied by pleasure or pain' (NE 2.5.1105b21-3); but also, 'By the affections I mean such things as anger, fear, shame, desire, and in general things that, as such, give rise for the most part to perceptual pleasure and pain (EE 2.2.1220b12-14). Presumably it is not a coincidence that the Eudemian Ethics adds both the qualification 'for the most part' and the specification 'perceptual': Aristotle must think that a special kind of pleasure or pain attaches to most affections, though not all. The Physics identifies the affections with changes in the soul's perceptual part (to aisthêtikon morion) that involve bodily pleasures and pains excited by action, memory, or anticipation (7.3.247a3-9). Such pleasures and pains are excited by sensible things through perception or imagination (a9-17). They arise from their location within that part of the soul which Aristotle elsewhere calls 'the perceptual and desirous' (EE 2.2.1219b23): they are not merely sensible because conscious, but sensory in that they connect closely with sense-perception and imagination within the affective soul (to pathêtikon morion, Pol. 1.5.1254b8).*

*Many of the affections involve imagination (phantasia) in the service of memory and expectation; this connects them with the pleasures that follow on imagination as a weak form of perception (Rhet. 1.11.1370a27-32)."*

*"It is true that there is no explicit mention of belief in the initial definition of anger (2.2.1378a30-2); but belief is implicit in mention of desire (orexis), given that such orexis is equated with 'aiming at' (ephiesthai), which is taken to presuppose believing, and not just imagining, that an end is attainable."*

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## **Post by "Don" of September 9, 2022 at 5:16 AM**

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

the author uses "affections" in place of "emotions"

Looks like the reason the author uses affections is because Aristotle uses our old friend pathē πάθη there. I double-checked both citations.

Pathē means "that which one experiences, that which happens to a person, that which *affects* a person." So it's not affection like "He has an affection for his dog" but affection instead of using feeling (something one feels) since it appears Aristotle is using it to refer to everything that can be contained under pleasure and/or pain. So Epicurus and Aristotle both use pathē to refer to the large categories of pleasure/pain.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of September 9, 2022 at 7:03 AM**

[reneliza](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Were you by chance raised Catholic? 😊

I had second thoughts about that question that as soon as I posted it because sometimes tone doesn't translate well even with emoticons, and sometimes issues are too sensitive to deal with purely philosophically. In my case I have gotten use to Joshua discussing his Catholic

background on the podcast and I probably carried that over in this question when others might be less willing to discuss their own backgrounds..

However rather than remove the comment let me just clarify that I don't mean the question in a negative way other than in the general spirit of tracing down modern attitudes, rather than anything "personal." Of course one of the major themes of Epicurean philosophy is that of the problems caused by religion, and it is sort of stereotypical Catholic in my understanding that "guilt" is something that Catholicism seems to teach to people within that church. It would seem to me that Catholic doctrine might contribute toward seeing "desire" in a negative way, in the same way that various religious backgrounds might lead to various tendencies. In my own case I was raised Baptist and no doubt that influences my thought processes negatively even today, after years of trying to unwind those influences.

As with all our discussions here there is a limit between what we discuss philosophically and what we discuss from our personal lives, so if that question got close to that limit feel free to ignore it or respond as "abstractly" as you care to. The real question for discussion would be whether religious backgrounds of any sort would impact on our view of desires. I think it very probably can and does, and thus can be useful to talk about, thus the comment.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of September 9, 2022 at 7:48 AM**

Here's a related issue, but I don't have the time to expand it at the moment. I have long had a negative reaction to Martha Nussbaum's book "The Therapy of Desire" <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperbac...erapy-of-desire>

To me that title is off in the same way it would be off to say "The Therapy of the Finger." The default position in normal discussion would be that there is nothing WRONG with a finger in general, and only if a finger has a specific unhealthiness or lack of functioning does the finger need therapy.

So the book implies from its very title that there is something "Wrong" with all Desire in and of itself - which as we are discussing does not seem to be Epicurus' position at all. It's not "Desire" that needs therapy, but "Unhealthy Desires" or "Painful Desires" or "Impossible Desires" or "Unnatural desires" or something similar.

I have always read the book as a whole, and especially the closing chapters, as expressing some very negative views about Epicurean philosophy, and as taking a pro-Stoic position. But I don't think I have realized before that the very title seems to be taking what appears to me to be an unduly negative view of all desire. I think the title is revealing of something before the cover of the book is evened open. Is all of the rest of non-Epicurean Greek philosophy negative

toward all desire? I find that difficult to believe, so is the issue some viewpoint of Nussbaum's herself, or of Greek philosophy.

As for religious influence in that case, I could be wrong but I think Martha Nussbaum is Jewish rather than Catholic. I am not aware of any specific tendency in Judaism to be negative toward all desire, but again I could be wrong there too. Nussbaum's attitudes toward desire in general, if in fact she has a negative one, may have totally different origins or foundations.

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### **Post by “Don” of September 9, 2022 at 8:20 AM**

I need to read Nussbaum's whole book. I have a copy. One of the first I bought and then read the Epicurean parts but it has been several years.

I always took the title to mean "using desire as therapy." So, obviously I've missed out on her larger context. Add it to my infinitely growing list of "to be read."

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of September 9, 2022 at 8:29 AM**

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

So, obviously I've missed out on her larger context

You may not have missed it at all - it could be me. I know I read the whole thing years ago so my memory could be failing me but that is what I remember coming away with, but it's possible my memory has been warped by concern over this "All desire is bad/painful" issue.

The excerpts I listed in the past seem mostly concerned with other issues [Nussbaum \(Martha\) - "Therapy of Desire"](#)

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### **Post by “reneliza” of September 9, 2022 at 8:33 AM**

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

Excellent quote Godfrey! That is one we do not talk about much but looks very relevant.

[Quote from reneliza](#)

Really just what I've been saying - that I have no conception of desire that is without any pain

And maybe that is exactly an artifact of the corruption of the modern monotheistic world and misrepresentation of Epicurean philosophy - that you and a lot of people DONT have such a conception(?). And for that reason that may be why this point needs to be pounded home in modern Epicurean discussion.

Were you by chance raised Catholic? 😊

I totally agree - and have no offense since I was raised atheist and materialist (fairly hedonistic, even). I have gone through my own crises of "faith" but was always taught that there's only one life, so the point of it is to live it.

While it's possible that this is an artifact just from existing in America and absorbing certain ideas, I'm not sure that's it. Because I don't think of people with desires as morally bad or wrong any more than I think that of people dealing with any other kind of pain. I definitely don't think that desires should be suppressed, because that is generally going to end up with some other complications either psychological or physical.

I think the path to "zero desire" (noting it's not a permanent state since you'll always need to eat again) is to meet all the desires you can and expunge the rest. Of course picking and choosing the ones that will actually bring more pleasure than pain to meet.

I can conceive of motivators to action that aren't inherently painful (I think I can, anyway) but are only preferences. I suppose this is what the unnecessary desires are meant to be. I just can't conceive of using the word desire there. Maybe my understanding of the word is just too strong?

In researching some things I also just found a forum where someone described Epicurus as "the first pro-ana" so... this is what we have to work with [ ] [ ] [ ]

---

## Post by "Cassius" of September 9, 2022 at 8:35 AM

Dare I ask what "first pro-ana" means?

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2651-episode-one-hundred-thirty-eight-letter-to-menoceus-5-pleasure-part-one/>

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## Post by “reneliza” of September 9, 2022 at 8:53 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Dare I ask what "first pro-ana" means?

pro-ana is a position in favor of anorexia (the word itself deriving from the greek word orexis which Epicurus used in some circumstances instead of epithymia - although exactly where he used each was what I was trying to determine)

The poster said that reading the Letter to Menoecus (which she described as being about "the absence of desire") in college helped her learn to suppress her desires including actual hunger. She respected Epicurus for living on a restrictive diet of only bread and water - missing the crucial point as Don has brought up before that this was meant to mean ordinary food and not an ascetic or lacking diet - and then binging when invited to a feast.

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 9, 2022 at 10:05 AM

### [Quote from reneliza](#)

The poster said that reading the Letter to Menoecus (which she described as being about "the absence of desire") in college helped her learn to suppress her desires including actual hunger. She respected Epicurus for living on a restrictive diet of only bread and water - missing the crucial point as Don has brought up before that this was meant to mean ordinary food and not an ascetic or lacking diet - and then binging when invited to a feast.

OMG!

I feel sure if Epicurus were alive he would NOT be happy with how his philosophy is being used! I don't like referring to slaves, and it is not entirely clear how much property Epicurus had (though it appears to be significant) but I think one of the arguments that ought to cause these people to reconsider their positions is to review Epicurus' will and consider whether Epicurus himself was restricting himself to "ordinary food" on all occasions, much less "bread and water. They should also consider exactly how many of multiple pieces of property and how many of multiple slaves are required to live a life of "absence of desire" as they apparently suppose Epicurus to have lived. They would then be confronted with the need to determine whether they really want to take advice from an absolute hypocrite, or whether perhaps their own

understanding of his teachings might need adjustment.

And there are many many other arguments to be made, even if we presume that every Roman Epicurean was a "bad Epicurean" which would also be a very very long stretch to assume.