

Would Epicurus say: "Infinite Time contains no more pain than limited time when the limit of pain is measured by reason?"

Post by "Cassius" of July 20, 2024 at 10:44 PM

Joshua brought up the question in the thread title tonight in our Twentieth Zoom, and I think it's a great question.

Whichever way one wants to answer, Yes or No, the discussion should bring greater clarity to the meaning of - [PD19](#). "Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure."

What do you think. Would Epicurus endorse this variation of [PD19](#), and if so how would he answer it, and with what kind of explanation?

Post by "Don" of July 20, 2024 at 11:38 PM

Finite time and infinite time contain the same amount of joy, if its limits are measured out through reasoning. [Saint-Andre translation; Also VS22, by the way]

Unlimited time and limited time afford an equal amount of pleasure, if we measure the limits of that pleasure by reason. [Hicks]

See also:

Thread

[VS22 - Source in Vat.gr.1950](#)

Same as [PD19](#) (supposedly)...

[PD19](#) (Saint-Andre translation):

Finite time and infinite time contain the same amount of joy, if its limits are measured out through reasoning.

ὁ ἄπειρος χρόνος ἴσην ἔχει τὴν ἡδονὴν καὶ ὁ πεπερασμένος, ἔάν τις αὐτῆς τὰ πέρατα καταμετρήσῃ τῷ λογισμῷ.

VS22 from manuscript: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1950.pt.2/0256

epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/3965/

(Big red capital omicron) ὁ ἄπειρος χρόνος καὶ ὁ πεπερασμένος...



Don

July 15, 2023 at 4:32 PM

I don't necessarily like "joy" instead of pleasure. The word is ἡδονὴν and I feel it's important to show it is one of the feelings: pleasure and pain, which led Joshua (I believe) to ask the insightful question that he did.

I also think it's important to disregard the PD numbers. They weren't in the original. And I believe we need to read the full text on this topic in context:

As soon as the pain produced by the lack of something is removed, pleasure in the flesh is not increased but only embellished. Yet the limit of enjoyment in the mind is produced by thinking through these very things and similar things, which once provoked the greatest fears in the mind. Finite time and infinite time contain the same amount of joy (pleasure), if its limits are measured out through reasoning. The flesh assumes that the limits of joy (pleasure) are infinite, and that infinite joy can be produced only through infinite time. But the mind, thinking through the goal and limits of the flesh and dissolving fears about eternity, produces a complete way of life and therefore has no need of infinite time; yet the mind does not flee from joy, nor when events cause it to exit from life does it look back as if it has missed any aspect of the best life. One who perceives the limits of life knows how easy it is to expel the pain produced by a lack of something and to make one's entire life complete; so that there is no need for the things that are achieved through struggle.

Now, if we would switch pleasure and pain, how does that affect the meaning of this section? Can we even do it? From the first line:

As soon as the pain produced by the lack of something is removed...

There is no "pleasure produced by the lack of something" unless it is the pleasure of the lack of pain. So, it seems to me that the "the same amount of joy (pleasure)" can't be substituted for "the same amount of pain" because pain seems, by definition, to be produced by a lack of something? So while the question can be asked semantically, it can't really be asked due to the parameters being set out. The question is a sensible question on its face, but it can't really be asked or answered in reality. I think??

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3973-would-epicurus-say-infinite-time-contains-no-more-pain-than-limited-time-when-th/>

I guess we'd have to ask what is the limit of pain? The complete lack of pleasure, I suppose? If we do try that experiment:

As soon as the pleasure produced by the lack of something is removed, pain in the flesh is not increased but only embellished. Yet the limit of pain in the mind is produced by thinking through these very things and similar things, which once provoked the greatest joy in the mind. Finite time and infinite time contain the same amount of pain, if its limits are measured out through reasoning. The flesh assumes that the limits of pain are infinite, and that infinite pain can be produced only through infinite time. But the mind, thinking through the goal and limits of the flesh and dissolving fears about eternity, produces a complete way of life and therefore has no need of infinite time; yet the mind does not flee from pain, nor when events cause it to exit from life does it look back as if it has missed any aspect of the worst life. One who perceives the limits of life knows how easy it is to expel the pleasure produced by a lack of something and to make one's entire life complete; so that there is no need for the things that are achieved through struggle.

LOL It's getting late... so I'll leave this as a writing prompt if nothing else. Look forward to others' thoughts!

Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2024 at 12:12 AM

Joshua came up with the question in the title of this thread in part because Kalosyni asked for an explanation of [PD19](#).

One way of attacking that original question is to visualize water, symbolic of pleasure, being poured in to a jar, which symbolizes a human life.

Keep pouring pleasure into the jar for a minute, or a year, or for an infinite time, and you can never fill the jar more than full. The amount of water (pleasure) in the jar (your life) will be no greater after an infinity of time than after the first minute. The drops of water in the vase will have varied due to the continuous pouring, but the total amount of pleasure contained in the jar will never be greater despite the increase in time of pouring.

(This would make a better graphic as an animated GIF with the water continuously running and spilling over the sides of the jar, but that's beyond my ability at the moment.)



<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3973-would-epicurus-say-infinite-time-contains-no-more-pain-than-limited-time-when-th/>

Such an illustration might work for pleasure. Does it also work for pain? I think it probably does, but my mind is not made up and we had some disagreement on that in our discussion.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 21, 2024 at 4:01 AM

(Shouldn't the big jar be pouring into the little jar?)

I agree with [Cassius](#) ' conclusion in post #3. The way I think of [PD19](#) is: a life consists of a finite amount of time. For an individual, the amount of pleasure in their life will be limited by the length of their life. Infinite time is therefore irrelevant to calculating the amount of pleasure in a particular life. This interpretation, to me, is confirmed by reading the PD in context as [Don](#) has provided.

The same limit would apply to pain: one needn't fear an eternity of pain in the sixth circle of hell. Your lifetime is finite, and all of your pleasure and pain will be contained within that finite lifetime.

Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2024 at 6:30 AM

Yes, definitely -- the top jar needs to be larger, or in some way indicating that the pouring could go on forever - maybe no "top jar" at all, just a stream of liquid from a source that is off camera. As it is, you have to imagine the hand constantly moving to fill the top jar with more water, and then pouring it into the main jar.

So the graphic would have greater effect if it were an animated gif, with the liquid pouring in real time, and the excess above the rim spilling over the sides. But I don't know how to get together such an animated gif - that's a project for the future. But such a graphic would be desirable to have, because the action would continue forever as long as you look at the graphic.

Here's the part of Lucretius Book 6 that sanctions this specific allusion, connecting filling a jar with the issue of limits:

[09] For when he saw that mortals had by now attained well-nigh all things which their needs crave for subsistence, and that, as far as they could, their life was established in safety, that

men abounded in power through wealth and honours and renown, and were haughty in the good name of their children, and yet not one of them for all that had at home a heart less anguished, but with torture of mind lived a fretful life without any respite, and was constrained to rage with savage complaining, he then did understand that it was the vessel itself which wrought the disease, and that by its disease all things were corrupted within, whatsoever came into it gathered from without, yea even blessings; in part because he saw that it was leaking and full of holes, so that by no means could it ever be filled; in part because he perceived that it tainted as with a foul savor all things within it, which it had taken in.

And so with his discourse of truthful words he purged the heart and set a limit to its desire and fear, and set forth what is the highest good, towards which we all strive, and pointed out the path, whereby along a narrow track we may strain on towards it in a straight course; he showed what there is of ill in the affairs of mortals everywhere, coming to being and flying abroad in diverse forms, be it by the chance or the force of nature, because nature had so brought it to pass; he showed from what gates it is meet to sally out against each ill, and he proved that 'tis in vain for the most part that the race of men set tossing in their hearts the gloomy billows of care. For even as children tremble and fear everything in blinding darkness, so we sometimes dread in the light things that are no whit more to be feared than what children shudder at in the dark and imagine will come to pass. This terror then, this darkness of the mind, must needs be scattered not by the rays and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the outer view and the inner law of nature. Wherefore I will hasten the more to weave the thread of my task in my discourse.

Post by "Cassius" of July 21, 2024 at 8:42 AM

I'm continuing on a tangent away from the main purpose of the thread, so eventually we need to get back to that. However one more thing on the "vessel" picture. In my mind maybe the thing that makes this analogy most useful is this, and pardon my french but I need to be emphatic:

Quote

The vessel visualization makes clear how to refute one of the most damnably perverse readings that many people give to an important passage in the letter to Menoeceus, translated by Bailey as: "[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.

The damnably perverse Stoic/Buddhist interpretation of the underlined section is that what we are really after is "getting rid of pain" and nothing matters - nothing else is important - except that. So they read that as "when we don't have pain we don't need pleasure."

The part they leave out purposely is that when you are alive and not feeling pain you ARE feeling pleasure whatever you are doing!

Epicurus is not describing a point at which you "don't need pleasure," he's describing a point at which you "don't need MORE pleasure," and the reason you don't need MORE pleasure is that you already have all the pleasure you can handle!

I'm not singling out Stoics or Buddhist as intrinsically bad people, but to the extent Stoicism and Buddhism stand for this proposition - that we don't need and shouldn't want pleasure - then I am singling out any such doctrines/philosophies/religions as intrinsically "bad" from the point of view of a philosophy based on nature like Epicurus promoted.

Another point raised last night is that this discussion has something to do with infinity, at least in practical terms. For out into infinity - or at least as long into the future as supernatural religions dominate the world, people who read the Letter to Menoeceus are going to come across that same passage, and they are going to be bewildered at how to fit the pieces together.

The supernatural religionists/Buddhists/Stoics/Humanists are always going to try to pull that statement out of its context and use it to argue that "Pleasure" is not the real goal of Epicurus. It's in their nature - those groups are in fact enemies of pleasure and this world, as Nietzsche might say, and they are going to use every argument they can to dissuade people from pursuing pleasure.

The unfortunate truth is that most readers of normal upbringing are not going to be able to see through the deception unless they are given an explanation. They will need the vessel analogy, or the explanation that the hand when not in pain is in pleasure, or the comparison of the host pouring wine for the thirsty guest, or other analogies yet to be invented.

When you are talking with someone who does not understand this view of Epicurus - and that's what most generalist articles and books are doing, they are talking to people who don't already understand - simply stating that "pleasure is the absence of pain" is not sufficient, standing alone. It's necessary to go further to to explain Epicurus' complete way of looking at "pleasure" as the single word that describes the ultimate goal. Epicurus didn't write "pleasure is the

absence of pain" in the letter to Menoecus and then stop - he provided a much broader picture in the rest of the letter. He didn't stop there, and we shouldn't either, so picking that phrase and isolating it as if it is self-evident out of context is not promoting Epicurean philosophy, it's perverting it.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 21, 2024 at 12:33 PM

No-ish, but only over a few stylistic caveats in translation:

Usener and/or Arrighetti transcribe (what I read as) the reflexive pronoun αὐτῆς (autês), which is a feminine declension of αὐτός (autós). In my translation, I came up with the following:

“Unlimited time contains the same pleasure as that which is limited, if a person herself measures the limits by reason.”

While I usually prefer to employ gender-neutral language (for example, preferring "Sage" to "Wise Man"), I note that Epicurus sometimes employs feminine declensions of words, and where he does, I think it is important to give it its due. (For example, throughout the Epistle to Pythokles, unlike the other letters, Epicurus refers to "the gods" (*theon*) in the feminine *theia* or "divine [nature]").)

(I'm also seeing *autês* as specifying the other, general pronoun τις meaning "someone", "who", "one", or "a person" ... though it may actually be describing or reinforcing something else.)

We also find the adjective ἴσην (*ísēn*), the feminine, accusative singular of ἴσος (*ísos*) which indicates that which is "equal" or "the same". Translating "no greater than" (even in a *mathematical* sense) does not express *the same* thing, but carries a slightly different connotation

With this in mind, I think that the sentence is comparing two instances of maximum sustained states of pleasure. Contextually, we are discussing two πέρατα (*pérata*) or "limits" of pleasure, one lasting less than 125 years, and one lasting forever [i.e. the pleasure of the gods]. Here is another instance, like KD1, of Epicurus mentioning a "god" without ever using the word for "god".)

It's a small caveat, but it does *slightly* change the meaning. For me, it indicates that our lives are not diminished due to the fact that we are not immortal. Achieving the goal of life is not reserved for godlike person; we can all enjoy the universal goal toward which all life is directed.

Stylistically, I also note that ἡδονήν (hēdonḗn) is only used once by Epicurus in the original Greek. That is just an aesthetic choice, and does not affect the semantics of the sentence.

[Quote from Don](#)

I also think it's important to disregard the PD numbers.

Always this. 👍

Post by “Godfrey” of July 21, 2024 at 2:09 PM

So if I'm reading correctly @Twentier , you're saying that "amount" isn't a part of the original Greek? Am I understanding that correctly?

Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2024 at 4:16 PM

And Twentier are you responding to the thread topic question, as to substituting "pain" in the place of "pleasure," or are you just making an independent point about the meaning of [PD19](#) as written?

The latter is fine, but if you could also comment on whether it works to substitute pain, that would be good too.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 21, 2024 at 6:54 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

So if I'm reading correctly @Twentier , you're saying that "amount" isn't a part of the original Greek? Am I understanding that correctly?

Within the context of Userner/Arrighetti's renderings, I believe that is correct. I do not find an ancient Greek noun that corresponds with our noun "amount". The word being employed ἄσπερον

(ísēn) is an adjective meaning "equal" or "the same as". The noun that the adjective is modifying is "pleasure", so adding a second noun to that clause (in my opinion) is semantically unnecessary.

Though, again, I don't mean to make too big of a deal out of it. It's mostly stylistic.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the thread topic question, as to substituting "pain" in the place of "pleasure,"

[Cassius](#)this isn't clear. Your post quotes the Doxa in its entirety: "**Would Epicurus say: 'Infinite Time contains no more pain than limited time when the limit of pain is measured by reason?'**"

[Quote from Cassius](#)

but if you could also comment on whether it works to substitute pain, that would be good too.

My answer therefore changes from "No-ish" to a confident "**No**". "No more pain" is not the same as "continuous pleasure" because "no more pain" also includes "death", and that's no good. This is where we dodge the Cyrenaics accusation that our goal in life is that of a corpse.

Post by "Cassius" of July 21, 2024 at 9:58 PM

Just to answer the original question myself, here is my current thought:

I am open to the possibility that Epicurus WOULD say that "Infinite Time contains no more pain than limited time when the limit of pain is measured by reason," and here is why I am thinking that is possible:

As I see it, heart of the doctrine is that "full cannot be made more full no matter how long the time frame." If that is correct, then the analogy of it being impossible to make a full vessel being made "more full" over time applies no matter what is placed inside it.

The doctrine as written refers to "pleasure," but it would be just as true if it said "pleasures" or if it referred to any specific type of pleasure. The point being made is a "logical" point unrelated to the specifics of pleasure or pain. You could equally say the limit of quantity of "happiness" or "sadness" or any other human emotion or attribute, because the point is simply that "full means full" and it can never be made "more full" when you have a limited vessel.

So while it's likely that the "Limit of pain" is less interesting to discuss than the "limit of pleasure," I am open to the possibility, and at the moment tend toward the conclusion, that the same reasoning that must be used to gain a proper interpretation of the doctrine as written would apply even if the word "pain" were substituted.

I think probably why Twentier and I are for the moment reaching different conclusions is that Twentier is introducing into the hypothetical the question of death. I am thinking that the heart of the doctrine is the meaning of being "full." If that is the case, then the question of death is not truly relevant to the hypothetical. Yes the reason "limited time" is in fact limited is "death," but introducing death as the reason for the limitation brings into play something that doesn't affect the reason why the quantity of something in limited time is the same as in unlimited time.

[Quote from Twentier](#)

"No more pain" is not the same as "continuous pleasure" because "no more pain" also includes "death", and that's no good. This is where we dodge the Cyrenaics accusation that our goal in life is that of a corpse.

Now if "full of pain" were to mean "instant automatic death" then I can see that making a difference to the reasoning, but my first thought is that I doubt that Epicurus would have gone in that direction. Because I think the key point of the hypothetical is "you can't get more full than full," and not "total pain means instant death." It's interesting to consider whether going in that direction would lead to a correct conclusion, but I would see that as a separate issue.

At least the way I am looking at this right now.....

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 22, 2024 at 7:54 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As I see it, heart of the doctrine is that "full cannot be made more full no matter how long the time frame." If that is correct, then the analogy of it being impossible to make a full vessel being made "more full" over time applies no matter what is placed inside it.

Therefore:

Pleasure = a feeling of satisfaction and a state of being satisfied.

And now I recall what Seneca wrote regarding the Epicurean philosophy:

Quote

"This garden," he [the caretaker of the Garden] says, "does not whet your appetite; it quenches it. Nor does it make you more thirsty with every drink; it slakes the thirst by a natural cure, – a cure that demands no fee.

....The belly will not listen to advice; it makes demands, it importunes. And yet it is not a troublesome creditor; you can send it away at small cost, provided only that you give it what you owe, not merely all you are able to give.

[Source](#)

Post by “Cassius” of July 22, 2024 at 8:02 AM

Then the question arises, given the need to be suspicious of Seneca's Stoic-disposed formulations, whether being 'full' is necessarily the same thing as being satisfied?"

I can see a strong possibility of categorizing "satisfaction" as very subjective, while being "full" implies a much more objective standard. And I can see danger in accepting "being satisfied" at a stage of pleasure that is a lot less than being "full" -- a danger in accepting something that should *not* be accepted when more is in fact possible under the circumstances for that person.

Quote

"This garden," he [the caretaker of the Garden] says, "does not whet your appetite; it quenches it. Nor does it make you more thirsty with every drink; it slakes the thirst by a natural cure, – a cure that demands no fee.

There is a very Buddhist ring to that formulation that looks like a red flag to me.

My life is all too short as it is -- I am not interested in *destroying* my appetite for pleasure, I am interested in *experiencing* pleasure *continuously*, and doing so by understanding how there are different types of pleasure, not by "quenching" pleasure or "curing" pleasure. Those verbs of "quencing" and "curing" are not appropriate as general attitudes toward pleasure. Toward pain, yes, but not pleasure, and not "appetite" or "desire." Prudence is used to steer desire toward its

legitimate purpose, not to end desire or stamp it out.

I am coming around to the position that Seneca is a much more dangerous enemy of Epicurus than Cicero ever dreamed of being. Cicero was an honest and straightforward enemy - Seneca is an enemy who seeks to win by twisting Epicurus' words into something very different from their intended meaning.

So I would differ here:

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Pleasure = a feeling of satisfaction and a state of being satisfied.

Pleasure certainly does not EQUAL a feeling of satisfaction.

A feeling of satisfaction may in fact be pleasurable, and ought to be if the circumstances are such that you *should* feel satisfied. But a decision to embrace a feeling of acceptance or "satisfaction" when you have accepted less than you could and should have (if you are truly looking to maximize pleasure and minimize pain) is not in the best interest of a life of pleasure, and should not be viewed positively at all. That's a sell-out and a betrayal, not a positive accomplishment in which to take pleasure.

Post by "Kalosyni" of July 22, 2024 at 8:37 AM

"Nor does it make you more thirsty with every drink; it slakes the thirst by a natural cure, - a cure that demands no fee."

I think this is dealing with the idea of excess, as with intoxication by alcohol (and the feeling of wanting yet another drink) and the fee that is paid comes the next morning with a bad hang-over.

Quote

In contrast to the Greek ideal, the Romans had drinking habits that encouraged excessive consumption of wine, such as:

- They began drinking before meals on empty stomachs.
- They consumed excessive quantities of wine and food, and then vomited so that they had room for more.

- They played drinking games, including one where somebody would drink as many cups of wine as a throw of a dice indicated.

Clearly, in the first and second centuries BC, it was not uncommon to encounter intoxication among Greeks and Romans. However, initially it was not a universal vice and famous people like Cato the Elder and Julius Caesar only took wine in moderation. As moral values associated with drinking continued to decay, the habit of excessive drinking became more widespread.

[Source](#)

Post by “Cassius” of July 22, 2024 at 8:43 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I think this is dealing with the idea of excess, as with intoxication by alcohol

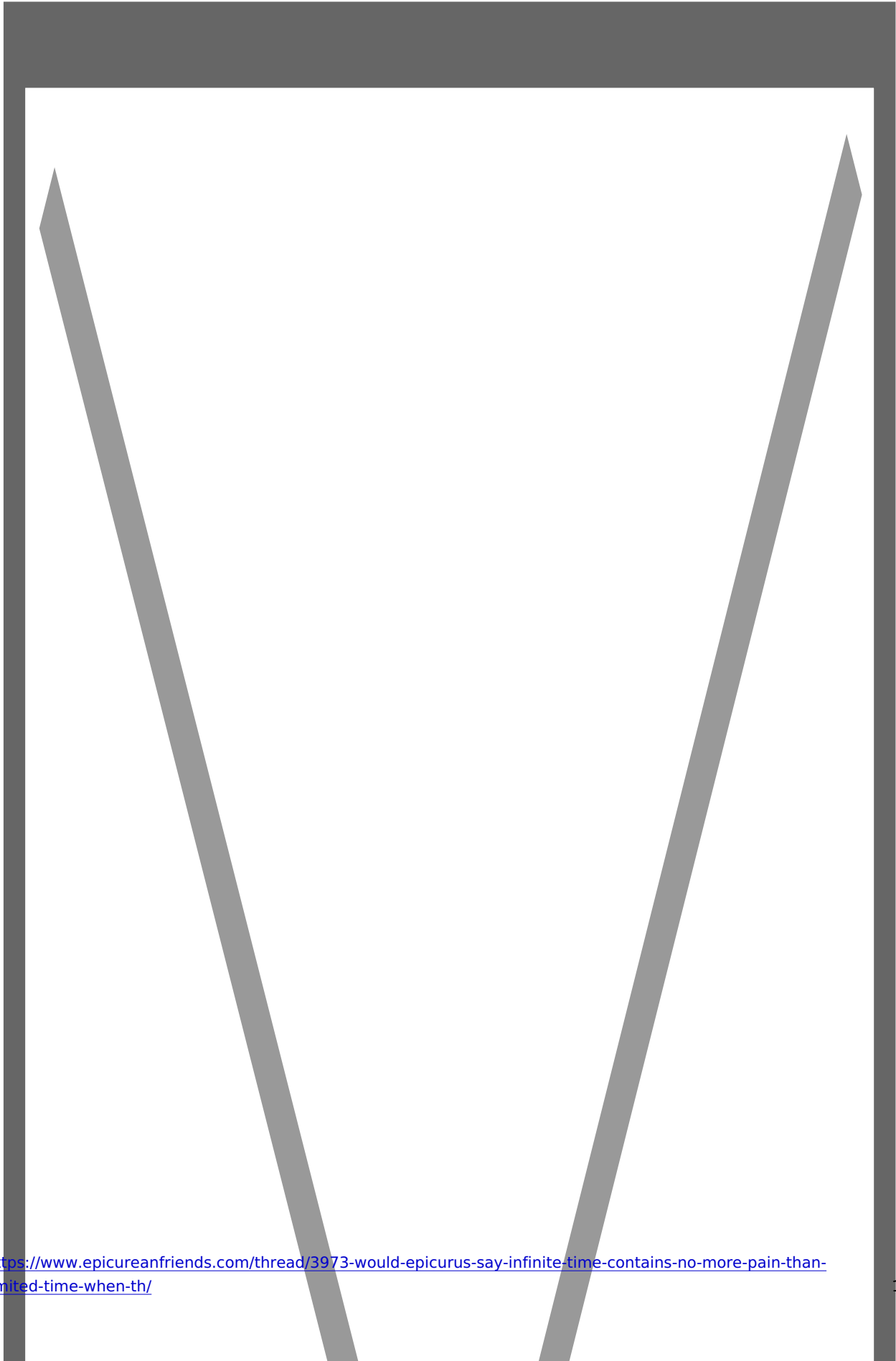
You may be thinking that because you are thinking correctly about things you knew before you ever saw them in Seneca.

What Seneca is doing is dangerous however in repurposing Epicurean words for his own uses. Donald Robertson summarizes the issue well in this sentence:

"Indeed, Seneca is implicitly criticising Epicurus by pointing out that what is good in Epicureanism is *not unique*, and what is unique in it is *not good*."

And he has useful examples of this in his article here:

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3973-would-epicurus-say-infinite-time-contains-no-more-pain-than-limited-time-when-th/>

[What Seneca Really Said about Epicureanism](#)

Survey of Seneca's remarks about Epicurus in the Letters to Lucilius, and elsewhere.

donaldrobertson.name

For example all of the following is from that article:

Quote

He [Seneca] says several times that the quotes he draws from Epicurus typically articulate very commonplace ideas found in the writings of many earlier philosophers, poets, and playwrights. There are many ideas expressed by the Stoic school which we should not be surprised to find echoed elsewhere. However, that does not mean that the Stoics or Seneca agree with *everything*, or even the *main* things, said by these other authors. Indeed, Seneca is implicitly criticising Epicurus by pointing out that what is good in Epicureanism is *not unique*, and what is unique in it is *not good*.

By the ninth letter, Seneca is openly criticising Epicureanism, however. He rejects the Epicurean doctrine that the wise man *needs* friends to achieve the goal of living a truly pleasant life, free from fear and pain. The Stoic position is that the wise man is self-sufficient but that he *prefers* to have friends, fate permitting. Seneca quotes a letter of Epicurus as saying that the wise man needs friends for the reason:

Quote

That there may be someone to sit by him when he is ill, to help him when he is in prison or in want.

Seneca, like other Stoics, criticises Epicurus for teaching his followers to develop what we call today "fairweather friendships". Friends are valued by the Epicureans only as a means to the end of protecting their own peace of mind, comfort, and tranquillity. This is something Seneca, like other Stoics, sees as morally *reprehensible*. Seneca writes:

Quote

He who regards himself only [i.e., his own self-interest], and enters upon friendships for this reason, reckons wrongly. The end will be like the beginning: he has made friends with one who might assist him out of bondage; at the first rattle of the chains such a friend will desert him. These are the so-called "fair-weather" friendships; one who is chosen for the sake of utility will be satisfactory only so long as he is useful. [...] He who begins to be your friend because it pays will also cease because it pays. (Letter,

Quote

Apparently in reference to the motto above the door to the Garden (“Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.”) Seneca writes:

Choose, then, some honorable superscription for your school, some writing which shall in itself arouse the mind: that which at present stands over your door has been invented by the vices.

Post by “Cassius” of July 25, 2024 at 11:01 AM

Not quite so elegant as the photo above, but perhaps conveys the point just as well. You can only fill the bucket so far, and the bucket never gets more full than full.

 pouringwater.webp unknown

[PD18](#). The pleasure in the flesh is not increased when once the pain due to want is removed, but is only varied: and the limit as regards pleasure in the mind is begotten by the reasoned understanding of these very pleasures, and of the emotions akin to them, which used to cause the greatest fear to the mind.

[PD19](#). Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure.