

Confusion: "The feelings are only two"

Post by "Rolf" of May 26, 2025 at 2:10 PM

Hey everyone!

I've hit a bit of a road block again with the concept of "the feelings are only two". I've read up on this before and asked questions about it, but I'm still not entirely confident in my understanding. Specifically, I'm wondering:

- How are "neutral" feelings explained? (ie. When one does not feel particularly good or bad.) If I have a stomach ache, then I am experiencing pain in my stomach. But when my stomach is not aching, I wouldn't say I'm experiencing pleasure in my stomach. It just doesn't hurt. Additionally, my mental state quite often feels neither pleasurable or painful. I just feel okay.
- How are "bittersweet" feelings explained? (ie. Experiences that are both pleasant and painful, such as the remembrance of a lost loved one.)
- If the feelings are only two and pleasure is the absence of pain - illustrated by the vessel analogy - does this mean that every pleasure corresponds to the removal of some pain? I can see how natural pleasures like eating, sleeping, or friendship relieve hunger, fatigue, or loneliness. But how do we account for unnecessary or extravagant pleasures, like eating ice cream or reading poetry? What pain is being removed?
- Speaking of the vessel analogy and the general idea of pleasure reaching its limit at the absence of pain - does intensity of the pleasure/pain play any role in the "fullness of the vessel"?

I already have an idea of the "Epicurean response" to some of these questions, but I find it helpful to twist and bend ideas as much as possible to ensure that I understand them properly and that they hold up to scrutiny. Thanks in advance!

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2025 at 2:30 PM

Great questions. I'll compose a lengthier response and get back to you. To some extent this issue came up in our Zoom last Wednesday night and i am not sure we have addressed it adequately in writing here on the forum. Bryan and I touched on it in reference to a statement made about Epicurus' use of "definition," but we did not get a chance to elaborate. This will give [Bryan](#) and I and others a change to write more on this.

There's no doubt in my mind but that Epicurus did in fact divide all feelings into two -- Diogenes Laertius states that explicitly and so does Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends.

However this is also the point to which Cicero vigorously rejects, and which many people - even some here - find counter-intuitive and mysterious. So we need to be able to state the justification explicitly -- and I can tell you now that you shouldn't expect everyone here to give or accept the same answer.

I think I'll tag [Don](#) and @Josh too because this is question that's going to turn into a FAQ over time - if it isn't already.

Post by “Joshua” of May 26, 2025 at 2:34 PM

Cicero makes that objection in book two of On Ends: this is from the [Reid translation](#);

Quote

But Epicurus, I imagine, neither lacks the desire to express himself lucidly and plainly, if he can, nor deals with dark subjects, as do the physical writers, nor with technical matters, like the mathematicians, but speaks on a doctrine which is perspicuous and easy and which has already spread itself abroad. Still you do not declare that we fail to understand what pleasure is, but what he says of it, whence it results not that we fail to understand the force of the word in question, but that he speaks after a fashion of his own and gives no heed to ours. If indeed his statement is identical with that of Hieronymus, who pronounces that supreme good consists in a life apart from all annoyance, why does he prefer to talk of pleasure rather than of freedom from pain, as Hieronymus does, who well understands what he is describing? And if he thinks he must add to this the pleasure which depends on agitation (for he thus speaks of this sweet kind of pleasure, as consisting in agitation, and of the other, felt by a man free from pain, as consisting in steadiness) why does he fight? He cannot bring it about that any man who knows himself, I mean who has thoroughly examined his own constitution and his own senses, should think that freedom from pain is one and the same thing with pleasure. It is as good as doing violence to the senses, Torquatus, to uproot from our minds those notions of words which are ingrained in us. Why, who can fail to see that there are, in the nature of things, these three states, one when we are in pleasure, another when we are in pain, the third, the state in which I am now, and I suppose you too, when we are neither in pain nor in pleasure; thus he who is feasting is in pleasure, while he who is on the rack is in pain. But do you not see that between these extremes lies a great crowd of men who feel neither delight nor sorrow?' 'Not at

all” said he; ‘and I affirm that all who are without pain are in pleasure and that the fullest possible.’ ‘Therefore he who, not thirsty himself, mixes mead for another, and he who, being thirsty, drinks the mead, are in just the same state of pleasure?’

And in the first book, the Epicurean Torquatus touches on the problem of "Chrysippus' Hand", which deals with the same question;

Quote

Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension. But actually at Athens, as my father used to tell me, when he wittily and humorously ridiculed the Stoics, there is in the Ceramicus a statue of Chrysippus, sitting with his hand extended, which hand indicates that he was fond of the following little argument: Does your hand, being in its present condition, feel the lack of anything at all? Certainly of nothing. But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel a lack. I agree. Pleasure then is not the supreme good. - My father used to say that even a statue would not talk in that way, if it had power of speech. The inference is shrewd enough as against the Cyrenaics, but does not touch Epicurus. For if the only pleasure were that which, as it were, tickles the senses, if I may say so, and attended by sweetness overflows them and insinuates itself into them, neither the hand nor any other member would be able to rest satisfied with the absence of pain apart from a joyous activity of pleasure. But if it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain, then the first admission, that the hand in its then existing condition felt no lack, was properly made to you, Chrysippus, but the second improperly, I mean that it would have felt a lack had pleasure been the supreme good. It would certainly feel no lack, and on this ground, that anything which is cut off from the state of pain is in the state of pleasure.

XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slowness to its continuance. When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better? Imagine on the other hand a man worn by the greatest mental and bodily pains which can befall a human being, with no hope before

him that his lot will ever be lighter, and moreover destitute of pleasure either actual or probable; what more pitiable object can be mentioned or imagined? But if a life replete with pains is above all things to be shunned, then assuredly the supreme evil is life accompanied by pain; and from this view it is a consistent inference that the climax of things good is life accompanied by pleasure.

We discussed the passage from book two in episode [201](#) of Lucretius Today, which I remember being one of our better efforts...

Post by “Cassius” of May 26, 2025 at 2:39 PM

Thanks Joshua. Here is my current list of the quotes that are central to this:

Diogenes Laertius X-34 : *"The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined."*

1. ***On Ends Book One, 30*** : *"Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?"*
2. ***On Ends Book One, 38*** : *Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."*
3. ***On Ends Book One, 39*** : *For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure."*
4. ***On Ends Book One, 56*** : *By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the*

happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain. [57] But as we are elated by the blessings to which we look forward, so we delight in those which we call to memory. Fools however are tormented by the recollection of misfortunes; wise men rejoice in keeping fresh the thankful recollection of their past blessings. Now it is in the power of our wills to bury our adversity in almost unbroken forgetfulness, and to agreeably and sweetly remind ourselves of our prosperity. But when we look with penetration and concentration of thought upon things that are past, then, if those things are bad, grief usually ensues, if good, joy.

5. **On Ends Book One, 62** : *But these doctrines may be stated in a certain manner so as not merely to disarm our criticism, but actually to secure our sanction. For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.*
6. **On Ends Book Two, 9** : Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."
7. **On Ends, Book Two, 11**: Cicero: Still, I replied, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Clearly the same, he says, and indeed the greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be." (Plane idem, inquit, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest. Cic. Fin. 2.11)
8. **On Ends Book Two, 16** : *"This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man*

who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?"

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2025 at 2:40 PM

So we can cite quotation after quotation that establishes that Epicurus did in fact divide the feelings into two, and that he stated that if we are feeling anything then we are feeling one or the other and there is no neutral state.

However, ***What was his justification for doing so?*** Is the question that needs elaboration.

Post by "Don" of May 26, 2025 at 2:45 PM

As far as the "feelings are two," I fall back on the modern psychological research on valence and activation. You'll see some of this on this forum if you search for circumplex or Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, <https://lisafeldmanbarrett.com/>

There's also some research here:

[Russell's \(1980\) Circumplex Models – Psychology of Human Emotion: An Open Access Textbook](#)

My basic understanding, both Epicurean and modern, is that if you are **alive**, you are feeling something. There is no neutral state. It may be intense (high activation) or mild (low activation); and there will be an unpleasantness/pleasantness dimension (valence). But you never feel neutral if you're being honest with yourself.

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2025 at 2:57 PM

Here is my first effort to synthesize what Bryan and I were discussing last week.

The division of the feelings into two, and not more than two, is based on both feeling and philosophical reasoning:

1. We find through our own pre-rational feeling that all experiences in life naturally fall into positive (pleasure) and negative (pain) categories, and
2. We can and should through reason and logic affirmatively identify the healthy normal functioning of the mind and body (even when they are not being "stimulated") as pleasure.

If we did not hold point (1) to be true, then point (2) would not be justified. Insisting on the truth of point (1) separates Epicurean philosophy, which is based on the evidence of natural sensation (feeling), from Platonism, Stoicism, religion, etc which says reason and logic or divine inspiration alone, without the evidence of sensation, is sufficient.

If we did not hold Item (2) to be true, then we would not recognize as pleasure those experiences in life when we are not being stimulated. We would be like Cicero and Plato and believe that pleasure is not always available, pleasure cannot always serve as the guide of life, and that it is impossible for us to identify a life of happiness as a life of pleasure because pleasure supposedly requires constant stimulation, which is impossible to achieve.

It seems to me that an approach somewhat similar to this is probably where Epicurus was coming from in dividing the feelings into two. Some people will say my point one above is self-evident and all that is needed. I don't think that's the case - I think that the philosophical understanding is also necessary to understand why the division makes sense, and in support of that I would cite the quote from Lucretius:

1:146:

Hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necesses non radii solis neque lucida tela diei discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque.

Bailey:

This terror then, this darkness of the mind, must needs be scattered not by the rays of the sun and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the outer view and the inner law of nature; whose first rule shall take its start for us from this, that nothing is ever begotten of nothing by divine will.

Post by "Rolf" of May 26, 2025 at 2:57 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain.

Why is this? If the absence of pain is pleasurable, then shouldn't the absence of pleasure be painful, by necessity? When pleasure simply fades away, what are we left with if not pain?

Post by “Rolf” of May 26, 2025 at 3:03 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

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<https://psu.pb.unizin.org/psych425/chapt...cumplex-models/>

My basic understanding, both Epicurean and modern, is that if you are **alive**, you are feeling something. There is no neutral state. It may be intense (high activation) or mild (low activation); and there will be an unpleasantness/pleasantness dimension (valence). But you never feel neutral if you're being honest with yourself.

Thanks Don, it's helpful to hear it in more modern, scientific terminology.

Post by “Cassius” of May 26, 2025 at 3:04 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

As far as the "feelings are two," I fall back on the modern psychological research on valence and activation. You'll see some of this on this forum if you search for circumplex or Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, <https://lisafeldmanbarrett.com/>

And while I am glad to have any argument in support of Epicurus, modern research manifestly cannot have been on Epicurus' mind when he formulated his philosophy.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Why is this? If the absence of pain is pleasurable, then shouldn't the absence of pleasure be painful, by necessity? When pleasure simply fades away, what are we left with if not pain?

Given Epicurus' framework, I think it is clear that Epicurus would say that 'absence of pleasure' equals pain.

Post by "Rolf" of May 26, 2025 at 3:20 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Given Epicurus' framework, I think it is clear that Epicurus would say that 'absence of pleasure' equals pain.

How would this look in practice?

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2025 at 3:30 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

How would this look in practice?

In practice, when you view life as Epicurus suggests, you can find pleasure in all sorts of places and all sorts of things, so you're not going to normally find a "total absence of pleasure" situation. if you're absolutely unable to find pleasure, even using Epicurus' perspective, for

some extreme reason, then you're probably approaching a "time to exit the stage" analysis because boy has the play really ceased to please you! But as Epicurus says that's an extreme and unusual situation, unless you want to count the state that all of us will eventually get to -- when we are at a limit of frailty of mind and body from old age. But most of the time long before that we meet our end from some other cause.

I'd say you could also simply recognize that any painful experience can justifiably be called an 'absence of pleasure' experience.

Post by “Rolf” of May 26, 2025 at 3:37 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In practice, when you view life as Epicurus suggests, you can find pleasure in all sorts of places and all sorts of things, so you're not going to normally find a "total absence of pleasure" situation.

I feel this doesn't give “equal logical treatment” to pleasure and pain though. When talking about absence of pain, we talk about absence of pain in a specific location; absence of mental distress, absence of a sore back. And we call this pleasurable:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We can and should through reason and logic affirmatively identify the healthy normal functioning of the mind and body (even when they are not being "stimulated") as pleasure.

So I'm not referring to a total absence of pleasure, but specific instances of the absence of pleasure. I'm talking about the equivalent to the pleasurable absence of pain - the painful absence of pleasure. If the absence of pain is pleasurable, shouldn't the absence of pleasure be painful? Not only in a theoretical sense, but literally? And if so, does this not contradict the quote I posted above? (**“We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensue”**)

Post by “Rolf” of May 26, 2025 at 3:42 PM

In other words:

If the removal of pain is always pleasurable, why is the removal of pleasure not always painful? In practical, not theoretical, terms.

If the feelings are only two, shouldn't the removal of pleasure necessarily lead to pain? And not pain as a concept, but pain as a real, tangible feeling.

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2025 at 3:57 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If the removal of pain is always pleasurable, why is the removal of pleasure not always painful? In practical, not theoretical, terms.

Rolf your questions are the reason that I think that both of the two factors I listed are essential -- I do not think that you can reach Epicurus' conclusion without theoretical analysis on top of the actual evidence. If you do not consciously identify "absence of pain" as pleasure in your mind, then your body will not conclude that this labeling is appropriate.

To me, these doctrines point to the reasoning as a decisive, necessary element:

[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.

[PD20](#). The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life.

[PD21](#). He who has learned the limits of life knows that that which removes the pain due to want, and makes the whole of life complete, is easy to obtain, so that there is no need of actions which involve competition.

Post by “Rolf” of May 26, 2025 at 4:23 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If you do not consciously identify "absence of pain" as pleasure in your mind, then your body will not conclude that this labeling is appropriate.

Ahh, I see! This helps clear it up a bit. Even if the absence of pain might *feel* neutral, upon conscious identification and reason we can conclude that it is in fact pleasure. Am I understanding correctly?

Would you say that the inverse is also true?

Quote

If you do not consciously identify “absence of pleasure” as pain in your mind, then your body will not conclude this labelling is appropriate.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 26, 2025 at 5:32 PM

There is a lot of good stuff here in this thread - I'll need to re-read. (I've struggled with these ideas myself.)

It almost seems that "satisfaction" is the goal...

---> satisfaction which arises with the removal of pain

---> satisfaction which arises from easy pleasures that are not harmful or cause bad consequences

---> satisfaction with the types of pleasures that are available (through-out a given day it is mostly mental pleasures, with a few moments of pleasurable bodily sensations).

Post by “Cassius” of May 26, 2025 at 5:43 PM

How's this for a caveat:

As of the afternoon of May 26, 2025, unless and until someone like Don or Bryan or Joshua or otherwise convinces me I am wrong, that's the way it seems to me that the statements of Epicurus as recorded by Torquatus, Diogenes Laertius, the [Principal Doctrines](#), Lucretius, Diogenes of Oinoanda, and Epicurus' own letters best fit together. It takes the study of nature and a scheme of systematic understanding to reach these conclusions and have confidence that they are correct. Neither feeling nor reason alone can do it - you have to combine the two into a rational system where the one supports the other.

To return to Don's point, it is interesting that current researchers tend to reach the same conclusion, but given that they didn't have access to this information I can't see that the ancient Epicureans approached things that way. My first goal is understanding their position before I evaluate whether I think they were on solid ground. So I want to try to put myself in their shoes.

And as for their shoes, it seems to me that they were in the heat of battle with the Platonists and others to develop a philosophy of life that made sense and allowed them to confidently beat back the anti-Pleasure / pro-mysticism assertions of the other schools. Such a philosophy has to be both in touch with practical reality AND logically consistent and persuasive.

Fitting the feeling of pleasure together with sound reasoning in philosophy in this way leads to a logically coherent worldview that accomplishes that goal. It's not magic and it doesn't transform the world into a constant parade of champagne and caviar. But it does allow you to view the universe in a way in which you can live happily and refute the challenges of those who say that you have to rely on supernaturalism.

And thus DeWitt's statement - reason justifies the application of the concepts of pleasure and pain in this way, and humans are happier if they adopt this perspective:

Quote

“The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.”

Quote from "Epicurus And His Philosophy" page 240 - Norman DeWitt (emphasis added)

Post by "Rolf" of May 26, 2025 at 5:58 PM

Quote

The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that **reason justified the application**; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.

Great post. I'd like to give a lengthier response but for now just a quick one: How does reason justify the application, exactly?

Post by "Patrikios" of May 26, 2025 at 6:18 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Why is this? If the absence of pain is pleasurable, then shouldn't the absence of pleasure be painful, by necessity? When pleasure simply fades away, what are we left with if not pain?

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We can and should through reason and logic affirmatively identify the healthy normal functioning of the mind and body (even when they are not being "stimulated") as pleasure.

[Rolf](#) , I too had a hard time understanding that Epicurus did not allow for a neutral third state; only pleasure or pain. What I have come to learn from all these Epicurean writings is that if there is no pain (body aches or mental anxiety), there is always pleasure present. You just have to tune your mind in to the small pleasures that your body is experiencing when it is just operating normally. This is also what has been described as your body operating in

homeostasis, or in *eustatheia* (psychosomatic balance).

When sitting, standing, or walking in a neutral state, your mind can find many pleasures, just by tuning into your body's senses. The practice of "being present" is a good way to acknowledge natural pleasures; feel a soft breeze, hear a bird signing, see a beautiful photo.

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2025 at 6:48 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

How does reason justify the application, exactly?

Great question. Here I would say that this is where the study of nature comes in. You look at the universe and derive from what you see that it is natural and has no gods over it nor needs any outside justification. You realize that your consciousness is available to you but for a short time. You realize that being alive without pain is "good" and a privilege and a pleasure that is available only for a while. You decide based on all the facts that being alive is something that feels right AND you consciously desire to continue it and to make the best of it.

All sorts of reasoning can be used from all sorts of direction to reinforce this, but in the end the assessment you make of the universe and your place is that it is desirable - maybe as Nietzsche might say you say "Yes" to existence and the world, and you choose to value every moment of it that is available to you. Lots of Epicurean sayings reinforce that positive outlook on life. That's the direction I would take that answer.

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

You just have to tune your mind in to the small pleasures that your body is experiencing when it is just operating normally.

And as Patrikios says in using the word "tune" several times, the decision to embrace this worldview, rather than fear and otherworldliness and escape, is a conscious decision that requires you to "tune in" to this perspective. It doesn't happen just by falling off the turnip truck or by simply "observing" the light of day -- you have to put it together in your mind in a way that makes sense.

Post by "Rolf" of May 26, 2025 at 7:51 PM

Hmm, I understand where you're coming from. However:

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

You just have to tune your mind in to the small pleasures that your body is experiencing when it is just operating normally.

I'm partly playing devil's advocate here, but I also have to be truthful about my own personal experience: When I'm in a "neutral state" - not sick, injured, etc. - and I focus on my body's senses, I pretty much always notice some kind of ache, tenseness, stomach pain, itchiness, or some other uncomfortable feeling that I'm generally able to ignore when I'm not not fixating on it. This isn't some new sensation either - this has been my general experience for as long as I can remember, and I don't have any kind of underlying medical issues (that I know of) that would cause this kind of thing. This is perhaps why I've been finding it difficult to understand and reconcile the idea that pleasure is the default state.

Post by “Cassius” of May 26, 2025 at 8:27 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

When I'm in a "neutral state" - not sick, injured, etc. - and I focus on my body's senses, I pretty much always notice some kind of ache, tenseness, stomach pain, itchiness, or some other uncomfortable feeling that I'm generally able to ignore when I'm not not fixating on it. This isn't some new sensation either - this has been my general experience for as long as I can remember, and I don't have any kind of underlying medical issues (that I know of) that would cause this kind of thing.

I think a lot of people would say this, and I wouldn't disagree. What I would cite in response is the example of Epicurus on his last day or the hypo of being in the bull of Phalaris. Your mind should never be in neutral - it always has the capacity to generate positive feelings which are (or should be) more significant to us than those aches and pains you are speaking about. This would be another reason why I would emphasize the importance of the "philosophic approach" over and above any implication that we can find what most people think of as bodily pleasure simply by minimizing bodily pain.

These two examples (Epicurus last day and the bull of Phalaris) combine well with the hand of Chrysippus to lead in this direction. There's no magic underlying feeling that suddenly leaps to the fore when we eliminate pains -- we have to mentally appreciate being alive in order to generate the result we are looking for. The person who does not apply Epicurean philosophy in

this way will find nothing but emptiness when he drains his experience of feeling, and that's when he (the non-Epicurean) starts looking for "meaning" and supernatural escape.

Post by "Don" of May 26, 2025 at 11:16 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

When I'm in a "neutral state" - not sick, injured, etc. - and I focus on my body's senses, I pretty much always notice some kind of ache, tenseness, stomach pain, itchiness, or some other uncomfortable feeling that I'm generally able to ignore when I'm not not fixating on it.

That's simply because you're a mortal being in a material world. I have come to the conviction, using Epicurus's philosophy as jumping off point, that *there is no neutral state*. If you are alive, you're feeling, sensing sensations both within and around your body and mind. Even without the findings of modern neuroscience, I have no problem thinking of Epicurus thinking through this and coming up to a similar conclusion:

- living = reacting to sensations
- we are always experiencing our internal and external stimuli (note: Epicurus wouldn't use these words but I have no problem thinking of him thinking parallel thoughts)
- humans can experience sensations either positively (pleasure) or negatively (pain).
- There can be no "neutral" state; that would mean we aren't feeling anything, aren't experiencing anything. We are ALWAYS feeling/experiencing pleasure OR pain. We have no choice BUT to *experience* as long as we are living.

It's important to remember that *pathe/pathos* in ancient Greek most fundamentally means "what one has experienced." Epicurus took the bold step to say there are ONLY two ways to experience the world, either as pleasure or as pain. EVERYTHING we experience, internally or externally, is either painful or pleasurable. And he encompassed the totality of human experience within those two feelings.

Now there are gradations and types of pain and of pleasure: joy, grief, anger, ecstasy, boredom, sleepiness, elation, contentment, happiness, satisfaction, rage, love, disgust, and on and on. But *everything* - all of those - fall into either pleasure or pain.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Your mind should never be in neutral - it always has the capacity to generate positive feelings which are (or should be) more significant to us than those aches and pains you are speaking about.

I would disagree with [Cassius](#) 's wording. Your mind *can never be* in neutral. Your mind doesn't "generate" positive feelings, it experiences them before you can think about generating.

Epicurus' pain wasn't eliminated by his thoughts of his conversations with friends on his last day. He continued to feel his diseased, inflamed kidneys as searing pain. His memories allowed him to "hold his ground against" the pain as if he was drawing up his troops against the pain: ἀντιπαρετάττετο. Those memories gave him pleasure *in the midst of his mortal pain*, not in spite of the pain. He could be happy *with his life*, reliving those pleasant memories, in the midst of his pain.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

This is perhaps why I've been finding it difficult to understand and reconcile the idea that pleasure is the default state.

I don't know if "default state" is the right way of thinking about this. There is no "default" setting I don't think. The pleasure of the mind and body working well, being healthy, and having all your parts working in harmony is pleasure. BUT There is *no guarantee* in life that the mind and body are going to work well, that you'll be health, and that your various parts will be in harmony. You have to work at it. You can't set it to a default and just let it run. If you have that, you have everything needed to experience other pleasures. I would rather think of "a body without pain, and an untroubled mind" being the ground from which other pleasures can be more readily experienced. Granted, if we have that, it can sink into the background if we don't appreciate it... and if we neglect our body and mind, it can fall into pain, trouble, etc. There is no guaranteed default.

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2025 at 2:32 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I would disagree with Cassius 's wording. Your mind can never be in neutral. Your mind doesn't "generate" positive feelings, it experiences them before you can think about generating

We should talk further about (1) how to regard idle or non-Epicurean thought processes, and (2) whether it is appropriate to consider the mind as generating pleasure and pain. I am in general agreement with Don's post, but I think how we choose to use our minds does generate pleasure or pain.

Also, while I think it is very reasonable and justifiable to divide all feelings between pleasure and pain, and to insist that there is no neutral state, I am not prepared to say that Epicurus' categorization plan is the only one that can be proposed and discussed. Cicero and Plato have a different definition of pleasure than does Epicurus, and they call absence of stimulation 'neutral.'

I think they are wrong to regard it that way, but does that mean that their position cannot be acknowledged and discussed to explain the problem they cause for themselves? Is Epicurean philosophy best seen as the best choice for how to live because it generates the most happiness, or is Epicurean philosophy best seen as the way everyone in fact lives whether they admit it or not?

The latter view sounds to me like that "psychological hedonism" argument that I find extremely unhelpful, and yet I acknowledge that the argument exists. So too I would accept that it is possible to view the world as does a Stoic or a Buddhist, even though I would classify that view as wrong because it is harmful.

But for now I have no problem rewording "should never be in a neutral state" to "should never be considered to be in a neutral state."

Post by “Rolf” of May 27, 2025 at 5:21 AM

Fantastic discussion going on, Don and Cassius. Thank you.

[Quote from Don](#)

That's simply because you're a mortal being in a material world.

By this, do you mean that it is normal to feel aches, pains, and other discomforts when focusing on the body? If so, how does that align with the following?

[Quote from Don](#)

I would rather think of "a body without pain, and an untroubled mind" being the ground from which other pleasures can be more readily experienced.

If a body without pain and an untroubled mind is the essential foundation, I'm unsure if I'll ever reach such a state. This supposed "healthy functioning body, free from pain" sounds almost mythical to me. Do people really feel this way, beyond some scattered moments?

I hope I don't come across as pessimistic here - my intent is only to be objective about my personal experience.

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2025 at 6:50 AM

[Rolf](#) I'll say publicly what I told you privately - I do not judge your questioning to be pessimistic or too persistent. You are asking excellent questions and doing us a great favor by boring in on a key issue like this. Please keep it up and feel free to expand the questioning to other topics when you are through with this one!

Post by "Rolf" of May 27, 2025 at 7:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Rolf](#) I'll say publicly what I told you privately - I do not judge your questioning to be pessimistic or too persistent. You are asking excellent questions and doing us a great favor by boring in on a key issue like this. Please keep it up and feel free to expand the questioning to other topics when you are through with this one!

Much appreciated! I shall do so. 😊

Post by "Don" of May 27, 2025 at 8:20 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(2) whether it is appropriate to consider the mind as generating pleasure and pain. I am in general agreement with Don's post, but I think how we choose to use our minds does

generate pleasure or pain.

I'm rethinking that a little, in the sense of "what does generate mean?" Feelings, I suppose, do arise from our minds, so maybe "generate" in *some* sense is correct.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Also, while I think it is very reasonable and justifiable to divide all feelings between pleasure and pain, and to insist that there is no neutral state, I am not prepared to say that Epicurus' categorization plan is the only one that can be proposed and discussed. Cicero and Plato have a different definition of pleasure than does Epicurus, and they call absence of stimulation 'neutral.'

Anything can certainly be proposed and discussed. The question, to me, is "Does the idea correlate to reality or not?" Epicurus' categorization, to my current understanding, correlates to reality while Cicero, Plato, "St." Paul, etc. do not. I think some ideas in Buddhism are interesting, but overall it has too much other baggage. But that was why I considered myself a Buddhist for a number of years. It made the most sense to me and conformed to my understanding of reality *at the time* in contrast to all the other philosophies and religions I had studied up to that point. Then I discovered Epicurus.

Cicero and Plato redefine pleasure for their own purposes, but Epicurus' all-encompassing concept of pleasure and pain just makes sense to me. Could he have chosen a "better" word than pleasure? Maybe? But he was going for maximum impact. He was engaging in philosophical battle with the other schools, and fighting on the same field with them. He engaged with those ideas, took a hold of them, and used the terms of the day to explain reality better than the other schools.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

it is normal to feel aches, pains, and other discomforts when focusing on the body?

I would even leave off that last "when focusing..." It is normal - natural - to feel aches, pains, etc as it is to feel pleasure.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If a body without pain and an untroubled mind is the essential foundation, I'm unsure if I'll ever reach such a state. This supposed "healthy functioning body, free from pain" sounds almost mythical to me. Do people really feel this way, beyond some scattered moments?

An untroubled mind (ataraxia) to me - and this may be just me - is about doing away with unnecessary fears, anxieties, that clog up our experience of the world as it is. Dispelling those fears and anxieties provides a base of operations from which to experience life. I'm thinking primarily of the fear of death, of divine retribution, of fate, and so on. I'm still working through some of these myself! It's not some numbness that comes over someone, it's a confidence in one's place in the universe and one's agency in it.

I'm still working on aponia, but it doesn't -again, to me - mean total absence of pain. It's being in a body that does it's thing without effort, without struggle, and there are degrees of this - again, to my understanding. Like I said, I'm still working on this!

I agree with [Cassius](#) . Keep asking great questions! This really helps me question my own positions and to ask myself again some of these same things. Enjoying the conversation!!

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2025 at 9:56 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The question, to me, is "Does the idea correlate to reality or not?" Epicurus' categorization, to my current understanding, correlates to reality while Cicero, Plato, "St." Paul, etc. do not.

[Quote from Don](#)

Cicero and Plato redefine pleasure for their own purposes, but Epicurus' all-encompassing concept of pleasure and pain just makes sense to me.

I'm not adding anything new here, but we keep talking about "definitions" and "correlating to reality" for a reason. I always worry about staying away from "reductionism" -- implying that there is no fixed outside reality and everything can be changed simply by assigning different words. It appears Democritus went in that direction, and that leads to skepticism and determinism and all sorts of problems.

Then there's the opposite problem - thinking that there is some absolute eternal reference point either in heaven (Plato) or within everything (Aristotle), and thinking that our task is just to get in touch with this ultimate reality through logic, religion, etc.

What I think Epicurus is doing and we're trying to restate in English is that we should consider as "real" what our feelings tell us as to pleasure and pain. Those feelings come in many

varieties , and we can assign many different words and descriptions to them, but we don't change their nature by using different words. We legitimately "feel" certain things to be positive or negative, and we're not just arbitrarily changing the desirable or undesirable nature of the feeling by calling the good bad or the bad good.

I see this as analogous to seeing and hearing and the other core senses. We can assign all sorts of names to describe what we deduce about the inputs of the eyes or ears, but the inputs come to us, like pleasure and pain do, by nature, and without the eyes or the ears etc injecting their own opinions.

My point in writing this being that we're not just totally playing word games by dividing the feelings into two categories. When we observe that it's possible to divide the feelings into different categories, we tend to recoil and think that everything is totally a matter of how we define it, and there's no solid footing on which we can ever stand and have confidence in our conclusions. Epicurus is saying that you have freedom of thought and you can take the position that nothing in life is real or certain if you like, but if you do you will suffer very bad consequences. It's much better for you to look at nature and realize that no matter whether you like it or not, nature has given you faculties of feeling and sensation that when properly understood and used can lead to lives in which pleasure predominates.

Post by “Rolf” of May 27, 2025 at 12:02 PM

This discussion makes me wonder: How important is a conscious positive mindset/attitude to Epicurean living? I haven't seen this discussed much, beyond Epicurus' last day when he shifted his mind to pleasant memories rather than letting himself be distraught over the physical pain. I'm reminded of a quote by Viktor Frankl:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

What role, if any, does this concept of a conscious mindset play in Epicurean philosophy?

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2025 at 12:37 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

This discussion makes me wonder: How important is a conscious positive mindset/attitude to Epicurean living?

I would say it's very important. It seems to me that it's implicit in virtually all of it that you have to make conscious choices to focus your mind and decide to trust the senses and use them properly. If you don't then you end up like Cicero or worse, with an essentially supernatural or terrified or depressed view of life.

Now Cicero et al would say that it's more important to be in accord with the gods and virtue than it is to be happy, but that's again where you have to decide what kind of universe you think you live in, how you are able to learn things (if at all) and what choices you are going to make about how to live.

Post by “Rolf” of May 27, 2025 at 12:46 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It seems to me that it's implicit in virtually all of it that you have to make conscious choices to focus your mind and decide to trust the senses and use them properly.

I mean less in the context of “trusting your senses” and more in the sense of consciously shifting your mindset regarding pain.

If I’m experiencing bodily pain, for instance, it’s objectively painful. I trust my senses that I am experiencing pain. However, if I dwell on and agonise over the pain, I will experience it more strongly. On the other hand, with a more positive mindset, or a conscious effort to accept the pain as it is, perhaps its impact can be reduced.

Do you see what I mean?

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 27, 2025 at 12:54 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

When I'm in a "neutral state" - not sick, injured, etc. - and I focus on my body's senses, I pretty much always notice some kind of ache, tenseness, stomach pain, itchiness, or some other uncomfortable feeling that I'm generally able to ignore when I'm not fixating on it.

This reminds me that it does take work to tune into pleasure (I myself need to put more effort into it).

Have you tried observing the feeling that comes up when you come home from work and then finally sit (flop down) down onto a couch...ahhh what a relief.

Or...on a cold morning jumping into a nice warm shower...ahhh how good the warmth is.

Or...going for a jog and feeling a bit of a runner's high...or a brisk walk feeling the body breathing smoothly and functioning well.

As for sitting still and feeling pleasure, that takes work, and Buddhist meditation is a good way to find it (also it depends on the teacher and type of meditation) -- There isn't any evidence that Epicureans did meditation (but Torquatus explains the meaning of Chrysippus' hand which could be seen as very similar to meditation - I'll look for that thread and edit in the link when I find it).

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2025 at 12:56 PM

Yes I agree that that is true.

Also Rolf, have you read the Chrysippus' hand challenge, and if so what do you make of it?

It's in Book One of On Ends:

[39] But actually at Athens, as my father used to tell me, when he wittily and humorously ridiculed the Stoics, there is in the Ceramicus a statue of Chrysippus, sitting with his hand extended, which hand indicates that he was fond of the following little argument: Does your hand, being in its present condition, feel the lack of anything at all? Certainly of nothing. But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel a lack. I agree. Pleasure then is not the supreme good. My father used to say that even a statue would not talk in that way, if it had power of speech. The inference is shrewd enough as against the Cyrenaics, but does not touch Epicurus. For if the only pleasure were that which, as it were, tickles the senses, if I may say so, and attended by sweetness overflows them and insinuates itself into them, neither the hand nor any other member would be able to rest satisfied with the absence of pain apart from a joyous activity of pleasure. But if it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain, then

the first admission, that the hand in its then existing condition felt no lack, was properly made to you, Chrysippus, but the second improperly, I mean that it would have felt a lack had pleasure been the supreme good. It would certainly feel no lack, and on this ground, that anything which is cut off from the state of pain is in the state of pleasure.

Post by “Rolf” of May 27, 2025 at 12:59 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes I agree that that is true.

Is this something that’s discussed at all in Epicureanism? From what I’ve seen, the philosophy seems to be more focused on practical, physical choice and avoidance, rather than mindset.

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2025 at 1:09 PM

Dewitt stresses that attitude is a large part of what Epicurus teaches by pointing out that many of his teachings are just that -setting attitude - by such things as "believe that a god is a living being blessed and imperishable...." And others.

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2025 at 1:12 PM

For example Rolf:

10.2. THE DOUBLE CHOICE

The first and foremost refinement of the topic in the hands of Epicurus was to draw a clear distinction between choosing an attitude, diathesis, toward action in a given sphere and choosing to do or not to do a given thing within that field. For example, a man must first choose

what attitude he shall assume toward death and the gods, pleasure and pain, Necessity, Fortune, political life, monarchy, fame, friendship, diet, and several others. To exemplify from this list, the right attitude toward Necessity is to deny it, toward Fortune to defy her, toward political life to avoid it, toward fame to ignore it, and toward friendship to look upon it as the most precious of all the acquisitions of the wise man. The famous collection known as the Authorized Doctrines is rightly understood as a guide for the choice of attitudes toward the essential things in the art of living happily. The first, for instance, advises the disciple that the gods are not to be feared. This is an attitude, which is first to be chosen and then cultivated.

The choice of attitude, however, by no means abolished the necessity of making individual choices. The proper attitude toward pain, for instance, is to regard it as inherently evil and to be avoided; nevertheless, in the individual case the lesser pain, such as that of the surgeon's knife, is endured for the sake of the greater good. Again, the proper attitude toward food is to prefer a simple diet, but this does not preclude and even approves the occasional indulgence. Neither is political life to be avoided under all circumstances; the evil is not in such a life itself but in surrendering freedom by making a career of it. Thus in spite of the choices of attitude the necessity of making the individual choice is perpetual.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 27, 2025 at 1:24 PM

Apologies for lurking; lots going on in my life these days. I just want to toss in the observation that *both* pleasure and pain are guides to choosing and avoiding. We strive for pleasure and consider pain an "evil". But even as we sometimes choose a pain in the service of greater pleasure, even being more aware of our pains can provide us with guidance to greater pleasure.

Complete absence of pain, which is the fullness of pleasure, while it sounds great, is for "the gods". The rest of us may enjoy it from time to time, and the rest of the time it's a goal to strive for.

Post by “Don” of May 27, 2025 at 2:50 PM

Quote from Rolf

If I'm experiencing bodily pain, for instance, it's objectively painful. I trust my senses that I am experiencing pain. However, if I dwell on and agonise over the pain, I will experience it more strongly. On the other hand, with a more positive mindset, or a conscious effort to accept the pain as it is, perhaps its impact can be reduced.

I don't know where I heard it but:

Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.

Or words to that effect.

Post by "Rolf" of May 27, 2025 at 3:43 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Also Rolf, have you read the Chrisypus' hand challenge, and if so what do you make of it?

Hmm, I'm uncertain. I recall reading this before and not understanding it, and I'm not sure I grasp it now either.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

apart from a joyous activity of pleasure

[Quote from Cassius](#)

it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain

This here almost feels like an endorsement for the "ascetic absence of pain" argument. "To be in no pain" seems to be used here literally, rather than to mean "100% pleasure 0% pain". And, if I understand correctly, this state is put *above* "joyous activity of pleasure". How do you interpret this?

Though perhaps it's meant to be read as "since there are only two feelings, if the hand is not in pain, then it is in pleasure, and therefore feels no need for pleasure".

On another note, if I think about how my hand feels right now, I certainly feel some discomfort. I don't know if I feel a specific lack of pleasure in it though, because I can't think of anything I

could do to decrease the discomfort in my hand. Thus the most prudent option seems to be to accept the minor discomfort and think about something else.

I'm also unsure about how this passage relates to the topic at hand (no pun intended), in terms of attitude and mindset. Or was it meant as a more general callback to the initial topic of the thread?

Post by “Rolf” of May 27, 2025 at 4:10 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Anything can certainly be proposed and discussed. The question, to me, is "Does the idea correlate to reality or not?" Epicurus' categorization, to my current understanding, correlates to reality while Cicero, Plato, "St." Paul, etc. do not. I think some ideas in Buddhism are interesting, but overall it has too much other baggage. But that was why I considered myself a Buddhist for a number of years. It made the most sense to me and conformed to my understanding of reality at the time in contrast to all the other philosophies and religions I had studied up to that point. Then I discovered Epicurus.

100% agree. I aim to be pragmatic, and to me Epicurus' philosophy is the most pragmatic. Even from my beginner's standpoint where I don't fully grasp all the concepts yet, it requires little to no leaps in logic compared to the vast majority of other philosophies I've looked into.

Speaking of which - a vaguely related thought I want to bring up. There are times when I find myself doubting whether Epicurean philosophy can truly *work* for me — not because I disagree with its core ideas, but because I live with a persistent undercurrent of physical discomfort. I start to wonder if Epicureanism assumes a baseline of health that I just don't have.

In those moments, other perspectives become tempting. The “surrender to the flow” of Taoism, or the radical acceptance of Stoicism, can seem like a way to bypass the whole problem of pain — to dissolve it in detachment. And yet, they ultimately drift from reality by denying that pleasure and pain matter.

Regardless of what I feel, it is clear as day to me that pleasure and pain *do* in fact matter, and that Epicurean philosophy is an accurate reflection of reality. Life is clearly about pleasure and pain at its core, without any kind of romanticisation of the latter. Pursuing pleasure is always going to be the optimal "strategy", regardless of any lingering pains that may or may not be able to be stamped out. Even for somebody experiencing truly severe chronic pains, following the reality of Epicureanism is going to be far more effective than chasing mirages with Stoicism and the like.

Post by “Rolf” of May 27, 2025 at 4:39 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

We strive for pleasure and consider pain an "evil". But even as we sometimes choose a pain in the service of greater pleasure, even being more aware of our pains can provide us with guidance to greater pleasure.

For sure. When it comes to pains that are chosen to avoid greater pain or achieve greater pleasure, I completely understand. However, I am more concerned about the pains that we do *not* choose - the unnecessary pains that serve no purpose. How do we reconcile them under Epicureanism, particularly if they are frequent? If one is truly unable to get rid of such pains, is it best to adjust one's mindset and accept them? Does Epicurus write about this sort of thing? From what I've read so far, pain is mainly mentioned in the contexts of a) pain should be avoided and b) some pains should be chosen in the name of prudence. But what of the pains that can neither be avoided nor are chosen?

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2025 at 4:44 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

This here almost feels like an endorsement for the "ascetic absence of pain" argument. "To be in no pain" seems to be used here literally, rather than to mean "100% pleasure 0% pain". And, if I understand correctly, this state is put above "joyous activity of pleasure". How do you interpret this? Though perhaps it's meant to be read as "since there are only two feelings, if the hand is not in pain, then it is in pleasure, and therefore feels no need for pleasure".

Yes I think your last sentence is the explanation. There's a lot to process in the whole passage, among which is the fact that we don't think of a hand or any other part of the body as having its own separate will or thought process to think that it "lacks" anything. So there's some underlying premise here that's not being stated as to why the whole question should be interpreted as making sense. I presume that Chrysippus is reasoning something along the lines of "You Epicurus say that pleasure is the guide of ALL living things, so it ought not make any difference whether the living thing has a brain or not, so let's pick a "hand."

When you put it together with much else that Cicero says, the general point seems to be that Chrysippus is taking the orthodox position that pleasure means "stimulation." If pleasure means stimulation, and Epicurus is going to assert that all things are guided toward pleasure, then a hand should feel the lack of pleasure when it is not stimulated, and the hand should want stimulation. The fact that the hand doesn't seem to want stimulation is to Chrysippus proof that the hand does not identify pleasure as the good. And if the hand doesn't, Epicurus, then why should we presume that pleasure is nature's goal for living things -- your theory is blown to bits.

And that's why Torquatus' father told him that the argument was laughable, as it is effective against people like the Cyreniacs who identify pleasure with stimulation, but it doesn't touch Epicurus, since Epicurus' definition of pleasure is more than just stimulation, and includes healthy normal functioning. And since there is no reason to believe that Chrysippus' hand was not functioning normally at the time of the questioning, in the Epicurean view Chrysippus' hand is experiencing pleasure (because normal healthy condition is considered to be pleasure, even though that condition isn't stimulation).

For me the trickier part is where Torquatus goes further, as he does several times, and state that the absence of pain (which I think is fairly interpreted as in [PD03](#)) means not only pleasure, but the height of pleasure. To me, the various examples can reasonably be interpreted only one way (especially when Torquatus says "nothing could be more true"). What is being referred to is the logical / mathematical point (which you cited already) that when there are only two possibilities, the absence of one IS the presence of the other - which is compelled by definition to the extent words have any necessity in them at all.

This is where I think Cicero intentionally leaves the the Epicurean argument incomplete, because he should have allowed Torquatus to spell that out explicitly. Instead, he leaves the implication clear but dangling. And in the case of the question regarding the comparison of the pleasure of the host who is pouring wine to the guest who is drinking wine, Cicero doesn't allow explanation by Torquatus at all -- we are just left to draw the logical conclusion that anyone who is "without pain" is at the height of pleasure - in pure pleasure - by definition.

Remember that the "height of pleasure" or "the limit of pleasure" need not be interpreted to mean "most intense" or "longest duration" or "all parts of the body." All "the limit of pleasure" really requires is that what is being measured is 100% pleasure and 0% pain. And if you say that your hand, or yourself, or anything else is "without pain" -- then if we are saying what we mean and mean what we say - then we are saying that we are at the "height of pleasure." People can balk and bark back that "that's not what I mean when I say height of pleasure!" But if they've been paying attention, Epicurus has shown them over and over that they need to think about how they are using words like "gods" and "virtue" and "pleasure" --- and "height of pleasure" is just another example of the same kind of re-statement of what a word really means.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I'm also unsure about how this passage relates to the topic at hand (no pun intended), in terms of attitude and mindset. Or was it meant as a more general callback to the initial topic of the thread?

I was mainly referring back to the general topic of the thread, but now that you mention it there is definitely a "mindset" issue here too -- seeing "height of pleasure" and "pleasure" in more accurate terms is a matter of adjusting your mind. That's the reason I entitled one of my recent articles a "Paradigm Shift"

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Speaking of which - a vaguely related thought I want to bring up. There are times when I find myself doubting whether Epicurean philosophy can truly work for me — not because I disagree with its core ideas, but because I live with a persistent undercurrent of physical discomfort. I start to wonder if Epicureanism assumes a baseline of health that I just don't have.

I would say that whether something "works" is defined by whether it is consistent with reality. The unreal and madeup can never "work" for any length of time. The Epicurean viewpoint is the one that is consistent with reality, so I'd say that it's the only one that could every "work" for anyone, no matter how much baseline of pain you start with. Epicurean philosophy is going to call you to do everything you can to change the situation, and even when it can't be changed, it isn't going to try to lull you into complacency with a noble lie

[Quote from Rolf](#)

In those moments, other perspectives become tempting. The "surrender to the flow" of Taoism, or the radical acceptance of Stoicism, can seem like a way to bypass the whole problem of pain — to dissolve it in detachment. And yet, they ultimately drift from reality by denying that pleasure and pain matter.

Yes that is the problem. And sure someone can go ahead and commit suicide, counting on their religion to take them to a better place. I don't see counting on fables as a workable solution - I see that as the ultimate in terrible trades and guaranteed to lead to unfortunate results. At least when you are dealing with the truth, even though the odds may be stacked against you, you aren't placing your hope in fictional rescues that will never come.

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2025 at 4:52 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

For sure. When it comes to pains that are chosen to avoid greater pain or achieve greater pleasure, I completely understand. However, I am more concerned about the pains that we do not choose - the unnecessary pains that serve no purpose. How do we reconcile them under Epicureanism, particularly if they are frequent? If one is truly unable to get rid of such pains, is it best to adjust one's mindset and accept them? Does Epicurus write about this sort of thing? From what I've read so far, pain is mainly mentioned in the contexts of a) pain should be avoided and b) some pains should be chosen in the name of prudence. But what of the pains that can neither be avoided nor are chosen?

We certainly sometimes are subjected to pain beyond our control. As Epicurus said to Menoeceus,

Quote

We must then bear in mind that the future is neither ours, nor yet wholly not ours, so that we may not altogether expect it as sure to come, nor abandon hope of it, as if it will certainly not come.

...

(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.

I think we've gone through this example before but the best is probably Epicurus own kidney disease. I don't know that he "accepted" it, but he found ways to enjoy life even in the presence of the pain. I think that's the answer to your question - what you can't get rid of you work on diluting with pleasure to the extent possible. That's not a satisfying answer to some, probably, but the fake gods and fake ideals of the Stoics and others are not going to be able to eliminate pain either, despite what they may say, and if they persuade you to give up studying nature and trying to apply your mind to solving your problem and/or diluting your pain, then they are taking away from you any real hope of bettering the situation. Because the hopes offered by supernatural religion and false philosophies aren't real.

Post by "Godfrey" of May 27, 2025 at 10:30 PM

[Rolf](#) I'll riff on your questions without, at least for the moment, any specific citations other than to say that everything I'm about to refer to is in the PDs. For me, the PDs have been tricky. At the beginning they sounded rather obscure, but as I have read, paused and returned to them over various intervals they seem to be pretty straightforward, although incredibly insightful. They require time and percolation.

First, living with chronic pain is a case study in the way in which it is unhelpful to imagine that there's a neutral state. The neutral state is, to me, a product of laziness and lack of rigor. When I've found myself thinking that I'm in a neutral state, I've repeatedly noticed that it really means that I'm not paying attention. Once I pay more attention to my feelings, I invariably notice subtle pleasures and pains at various places in my body and mind.

From this it becomes evident that, as stated in the PDs, pleasures and pains have intensity, location and duration. I often find that some of my parts are in pleasure or pain, but others not so much, or quite the opposite. And a feeling in one part might be drowning out a feeling in another part. A feeling may spread from one part to others: sciatica that comes and goes may prompt mental anticipation of pain, which causes muscles to tense, which lights up the sciatica... &c. (This could be thought of as an example of "pain v suffering".) Or a subtle feeling of pleasure might spread, thus increasing in location and perhaps duration.

Eventually, it becomes apparent that none of the feelings are constant, at least up to an extreme point as per [PD04](#).

For me, part of the beauty of Epicurus' analysis of pleasure and pain is that it is exceptionally nuanced and provides the Epicurist so much to work with. We can offset various pains by noticing and dialing in to pleasures in other parts, and we can work at increasing these pleasures even if we can't seem to diminish the pains. We can seek pleasure strategically when we understand what, for each of us, provides the greatest payoff in terms of maximizing our pleasure and minimizing our pain. Sometimes this takes time. Lots of time. But we humans are intricate instruments, not the golems that Cicero and the Stoics imagine us to be.

Post by “Bryan” of May 27, 2025 at 10:34 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

When I'm in a "neutral state" - not sick, injured, etc. - and I focus on my body's senses, I pretty much always notice some kind of ache, tenseness, stomach pain, itchiness, or some other uncomfortable feeling that I'm generally able to ignore when I'm not not

fixating on it.

I think this is typically the case for most people. For me, "clearing the mind" is pleasant before sleep, but when I am awake and ready, then "mind-clearing meditation" feels like intellectual asceticism and it is at this point I will notice the extra sensations you mention.

Happily, Epikouros recommends an active and applied mind, he says:

"I recommend continuous activity in physics and pacify myself particularly with such a life."

(D.L. 10.37a)

Epikouros fully acknowledged that all pleasures are *based in* active pleasures, but he identified the pleasure of being satisfied (i.e., "established pleasures") as the natural goal of living things.

Unlike ascetics, we do not deny the body -- and unlike the average man, we do not deny having reached full pleasure when we are satisfied.

"*Eating*" is pleasurable, but a life dedicated to "*eating*" is sad and unhealthy -- and so for the rest of the active pleasures. If we reach the point of satisfaction and wonder what else our body needs, we are missing the point. If we form a lifestyle focused on satisfying our physical pleasures, our intellectual abilities will suffer.

But bodily satisfaction is the beginning of the intellectual life -- and once this is achieved, then *here it is* healthy to settle in, and consume and consume (philosophy and science) as a lifestyle.

Post by "Kalosyni" of May 28, 2025 at 8:12 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

I think this is typically the case for most people. For me, "clearing the mind" is pleasant before sleep, but when I am awake and ready, then "mind-clearing meditation" feels like intellectual asceticism and it is at this point I will notice the extra sensations you mention.

Thanks [Bryan](#) , I also don't like the idea of "clearing the mind" -- as when you are awake there will always be something there. Better to focus on pleasurable sensations such as focusing on the feeling of the breath in the body (as it goes in and out, making it smooth and deep and allowing the speed of the breath to feel good as needed). Or there is the state of mental flow

when engaged in concentration (arts, crafts, etc.) when the mind is engaged and focusing fully while also feeling relaxed (just right) as at the same time one is engaged in the craft. (This is just an aside, had to share 😊).

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 28, 2025 at 8:17 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Epikouros fully acknowledged that all pleasures are based in active pleasures, but he identified the pleasure of being satisfied (i.e., "established pleasures") as the natural goal of living things.

Unlike ascetics, we do not deny the body -- and unlike the average man, we do not deny having reached full pleasure when we are satisfied.

"Eating" is pleasurable, but a life dedicated to "eating" is sad and unhealthy -- and so for the rest of the active pleasures. If we reach the point of satisfaction and wonder what else our body needs, we are missing the point. If we form a lifestyle focused on satisfying our physical pleasures, our intellectual abilities will suffer.

But bodily satisfaction is the beginning of the intellectual life -- and once this is achieved, then here it is healthy to settle in, and consume and consume (philosophy and science) as a lifestyle.

Thank you [Bryan](#) Well said! 👍 👍

Also, we carry on with our household duties, with joy and laughter [friendship] . --Vatican Saying 41

Post by “Rolf” of May 28, 2025 at 1:09 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

For me, the PDs have been tricky. At the beginning they sounded rather obscure, but as I have read, paused and returned to them over various intervals they seem to be pretty straightforward, although incredibly insightful. They require time and percolation.

Thanks for your insightful reply Godfrey. I really ought to spend more time on the PDs. That said, I appreciate you explaining things in your own words - citations are great, but it's helpful to have things explained in a different way too.

[PD04](#) which you mentioned gives a pretty straightforward response to my concern - despite having read it before, I didn't think about it in this specific context until you brought it up. That even "chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh" is relieving to hear and a good reminder.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

For me, part of the beauty of Epicurus' analysis of pleasure and pain is that it is exceptionally nuanced and provides the Epicurist so much to work with. We can offset various pains by noticing and dialing in to pleasures in other parts, and we can work at increasing these pleasures even if we can't seem to diminish the pains. We can seek pleasure strategically when we understand what, for each of us, provides the greatest payoff in terms of maximizing our pleasure and minimizing our pain. Sometimes this takes time. Lots of time. But we humans are intricate instruments, not the golems that Cicero and the Stoics imagine us to be.

