

Episode 295 - Plutarch's Absurd Interpretation of Epicurean Absence of Pain

Post by "Cassius" of August 14, 2025 at 6:06 AM

Welcome to Episode 295 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

This week Joshua will be away, and Don has kindly agreed to step in during his absence. Rather than continue in Tusculan Disputations in Joshua's absence, we will briefly take up a topic we have not previously addressed: Plutarch's essay Against Colotes. Here Plutarch notes that Colotes had written an essay to the effect that it is impossible to live happily under the non-Epicurean philosophers, and Plutarch attempts to turn the tables on Colotes and argue that the opposite is true.

This essay contains many specific allegations against Epicurus that are not well documented elsewhere, so even if we have only a short time, it will be good for us to point out to our podcast listeners the existence and general content of this ancient source.

We won't have time to read long sections from the text but what we hope to do is to make you familiar with the general outline of Plutarch's argument so you can come back to it again in the future and know what to expect.

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/67447827/media>

Post by "Cassius" of August 14, 2025 at 6:53 AM

There are 31 sections in this text, and to help organize the discussion here is a single sentence condensing each one. Links are to the Perseus edition:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4673-episode-295-plutarch-s-absurd-interpretation-of-epicurean-absence-of-pain/>

1. [1](#) Colotes has written a book "That It Is Impossible To Live According to the Tenets of The Other Philosophers" and this will be in response.
2. [2](#) The speakers will respond to the Epicureans' name-calling against the other philosophers, and prove that it impossible to live pleasantly according to the philosophy of Epicurus.
3. [3](#) The Epicureans base their claim to pleasure in the body, a "poor, rotten, and unsure" thing that experiences more pains than pleasures, both in terms of intensity and duration, and yet Epicurus has made "the removal of all that pains the common definition of pleasure."
4. [4](#) Epicurus' emphasis on mental pleasure is of no avail to him, because when he talks about mental pleasures he focuses on memory of bodily pleasures, and these are only an empty shadow - a dream - a fume - of the body's pleasure.
5. [5](#) Mental pleasures cannot rid us of bodily pains, as we see from the fact that the Epicureans themselves suffered diseases such as strangury, gripes, consumptions and dropsies; and life in this condition cannot really be pleasant, as they claim.
6. [6](#) Just like the Epicureans claim that the unjust man lives in fear of punishment, they too must live in fear of bodily pain.
7. [7](#) It is ridiculous for the Epicureans to argue that when all pain is driven out there is no further room for pleasure, and that to be without pain makes them equal to the gods -even the brute animals sing and fly about after they have satisfied their longings, and Epicurus would deny us even that!
8. [8](#) Those things that we require for life do not deserve the name of good, nor even the name of pleasure, any more than does a rogue's freedom from being in jail, and even brute animals are free from the worries of hell or gods - and yet Epicurus praises such freedom so highly!
9. [9](#) The bodily pleasures and memories of them are but slight, and have nothing in them that is great and considerable like that which comes from the contemplative and active and heroic aspects of life.
10. [10](#) The pleasures of the body, or memories of our dead friends, are nothing in comparison with the pleasures of the mind that come from contemplating Homer or Xenophon.
11. [11](#) The Epicureans chase away the pleasures of mathematics and history and geometry and music and the like, and these are far more pleasurable than the pleasures of the body.
12. [12](#) Epicurus bids us to set sail and fly from these greater pleasures of liberal arts, mathematics, poets, and especially history, which was derided by Metrodorus, in favor of grosser pleasures of the body.
13. [13](#) Epicurus was particularly hypocritical in disdaining the discussion or study of music and poetry, since he himself said that the wise man will love the music of public events.

14. [14](#) Given that we have both a mind and a body, it is ridiculous for Epicurus to place the good entirely in the body, and say that the mind has no good of its own.
15. [15](#) The pleasures of food and of drink and of the body are nothing in comparison to the pleasures of actions taken, such as by the heroic deeds of great men of the past.
16. [16](#) The pleasures of the stomach and the body that Epicurus finds so elating are nothing in comparison with the pleasures of the active and engaged life that Epicurus rejects.
17. [17](#) The pleasures of food and of the body are far surpassed by the pleasures of being brave and generous and honorable, and this is shown by what people choose to do in the short time left to them if they know they are about to die.
18. [18](#) Thus no one will believe Epicurus when he claims that he bore up to his final pains by thinking about his former bodily pleasures, and even Epicurus admits there are pleasures in fame, which is why he spent so much time writing books and exclaiming about how wise he was.
19. [19](#) Epicurus was illogical and hypocritical in casting away the fame and pleasure that comes from holding public office, and serving one's country, as that is far greater than private pleasures such as eating and drinking.
20. [20](#) Epicurus deprives us of the pleasures that come from knowing that the gods are in control and provide for us in our misfortunes and in death.
21. [21](#) Yes we should root out superstition but we must retain our faith in providence, because the joy and hope that comes from a true belief in god is much better than the bad things that come from improper fear and dread of the gods.
22. [22](#) It is much better and more productive to rely on the kind and powerful gods than it is to place your hopes in your friends, who are weak and will die.
23. [23](#) Epicurus's claim that our troubles will be short, or manageable, or that death will take us from them is no answer at all to the problems of life in comparison to relying on the gods.
24. [24](#) The argument so far is not complete; we must address what Epicurus' rejection of the gods really means.
25. [25](#) Since Epicurus said that fear of punishment is a bad thing, and it helps men refrain from doing evil if they fear punishment from the gods, men would be better off if they were **more** superstitious so that they feared the gods and punishment after death even more than they do, and thus refrained from doing evil.
26. [26](#) Men get more pleasure thinking the dead continue to exist after death.

27. [27](#) The belief that we cease to exist at death is demoralizing and dispiriting and thus prevents us from enjoying life.

28. [28](#) Taking away belief in immortality takes away the sweetest joy that most people have, as they lose the hope of a better life and seeing their friends again in the hereafter.

29. [29](#) Taking away life after death not only demoralizes the unfortunate and deprives them of hope for better after death, but it harms the fortunate, as it depresses them to know that they will lose the good things that they now have.

30. [30](#) To call not being in existence a good is to be ungrateful to existence.

31. [31](#) ***"So large a field and one of so great pleasures Epicurus wholly cuts off, when he destroys ... the hopes and graces we should derive from the Gods, and by that extinguishes both in our speculative capacity the desire of knowledge, and in our active the love of glory, and confines and abases our nature to a poor narrow thing, and that not cleanly neither, to wit, the content the mind receives by the body, as if it were capable of no higher good than the escape of evil."***

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 14, 2025 at 12:31 PM

This should end up creating a nice list of refutations of Plutarch.

And that list could then be turned into a nice list of Epicurean views.

Post by “Don” of August 14, 2025 at 11:31 PM

Great outline, [Cassius](#) . This will be VERY helpful.

Post by “Cassius” of August 15, 2025 at 2:35 AM

It seems to me that Plutarch in Section 7 does a particularly persuasive job of setting up the question clearly, and I see no way around a direct and pointed confrontation.

Plutarch is correct that even the "brute animals" do not deny themselves additional pleasure like singing and playing after they have fulfilled their basic needs such as for food and water. *And yet Epicurus supposedly advocated that humans should pursue nothing but the most basic satisfaction of necessary needs, and then timidly refrain from any further enjoyment whatsoever as dangerous to our tranquility?*

Plutarch was in a position to know the truth, so he is either shamelessly lying, or - if he were deemed to be correct - I would never recommend anyone have anything to do with Epicurean philosophy.

Plutarch is shamelessly lying, and probably for the same reason as Cicero. He hates Epicurean philosophy and he has no problem spinning noble lies in the service of what he probably sincerely but mistakenly thinks is the best interest of his readers.

And yet the criticism Plutarch makes here is *not rejected* by many so-called friends of Epicurus today. Many self-designated advocates for Epicurus actually accept and embrace Plutarch's accusation as the proper interpretation of what Epicurus was teaching, and defend it as a wise position.

Paraphrasing Cicero's comment as to Plato, I'd rather adopt Plutarch's philosophy than have as my guide "Epicureans" who would embrace such a low standard of pleasure. And I don't for a second believe that the widespread adoption of Epicurean views by the ancient Romans and Greeks occurred because the Epicureans actually embraced the kind of view that Plutarch is describing.

I am convinced that the truth is that the ancient Romans and Greeks understood Epicurus to be advocating pleasure as a wide term embracing all mental and physical activities which are not painful. Epicurus' innovation in advocating that pleasure is the goal of life (rather than virtue or piety or any other word) was to hold that all experiences in life are either pleasurable or painful. On that basis, Epicurus concludes that if any mental or physical experience is not painful, then we should consider it to be included under the definition of pleasure. And even *painful* mental and physical activities are to be chosen when they lead ultimately to more pleasure than pain.

Under Epicurus' viewpoint minimizing pain means exactly the same thing as maximizing pleasure, but Cicero and Plutarch and many others recognized that if you strip out from Epicurean philosophy the premise that all experiences are to be categorized as either pleasurable or painful, then the result will look like minimizing pain is a goal in itself. Minimizing pain as a goal in itself can be made to look very much like minimizing pleasure, and once you have convinced someone that this was what Epicurus was teaching, you have ripped the heart out of Epicurus' teachings. You will have created a zombie that will see its mission as to search out and destroy whatever is left of Epicurean philosophy.

The truth is that the texts amply support the conclusion that Epicurus' single test of whether to pursue a particular desire for pleasure is not basic survival through minimalism and asceticism.

The true test is whether under all the circumstances you rationally evaluate that pursuing any particular course will lead you to more pleasure than pain. And strong positive emotions like joy and delight are what truly motivates humans, just like they motivate the animals that Cicero and Plutarch look down upon.

Quote

They therefore assign not only a treacherous and unsure ground of their pleasurable living, but also one in all respects despicable and little, if the escaping of evils be the matter of their complacency and last good. But now they tell us, nothing else can be so much as imagined, and nature hath no other place to bestow her good in but only that out of which her evil hath been driven; as Metrodorus speaks in his book against the Sophists. So that this single thing, to escape evil, he says, is the supreme good; for there is no room to lodge this good in where nothing of what is painful and afflicting goes out. Like unto this is that of Epicurus, where he saith: The very essence of good arises from the escaping of bad, and a man's recollecting, considering, and rejoicing within himself that this hath befallen him. For what occasions transcending joy (he saith) is some great impending evil escaped; and in this lies the very nature and essence of good, if a man attain unto it aright, and contain himself when he hath done, and not ramble and prate idly about it. Oh the rare satisfaction and felicity these men enjoy, that can thus rejoice for having undergone no evil and endured neither sorrow nor pain! Have they not reason, think you, to value themselves for such things as these, and to talk as they are wont when they style themselves immortals and equals to Gods?—and [p. 168] when, through the excessiveness and transcendency of the blessed things they enjoy, they rave even to the degree of whooping and hollowing for very satisfaction that, to the shame of all mortals, they have been the only men that could find out this celestial and divine good that lies in an exemption from all evil So that their beatitude differs little from that of swine and sheep, while they place it in a mere tolerable and contented state, either of the body, or of the mind upon the body's account. For even the wiser and more ingenious sort of brutes do not esteem escaping of evil their last end; but when they have taken their repast, they are disposed next by fulness to singing, and they divert themselves with swimming and flying; and their gayety and sprightliness prompt them to entertain themselves with attempting to counterfeit all sorts of voices and notes; and then they make their caresses to one another, by skipping and dancing one towards another; nature inciting them, after they have escaped evil, to look after some good, or rather to shake off what they find uneasy and disagreeing, as an impediment to their pursuit of something better and more congenial.

Post by “Don” of August 15, 2025 at 7:39 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4673-episode-295-plutarch-s-absurd-interpretation-of-epicurean-absence-of-pain/>

Wow! Well and passionately said! Are you sure you even *need* me for the Plutarch episode? I feel like we could just wind you up and let you go.

In 7, Plutarch goes on about Epicurus' quote (and it is a quote) that "The very essence of good arises from the escaping of bad, and a man's recollecting, considering, and rejoicing within himself that this hath befallen him. For what occasions transcending joy (he saith) is some great impending evil escaped; and in this lies the very nature and essence of good, if a man attain unto it aright, and contain himself when he hath done, and not ramble and prate idly about it." [U423, source: This section of Plutarch]

[An alternative translation:](#)

Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 7, p. 1091A: Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their "thing delighted" - their good - is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: "That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good."

Ibid., 8, p. 1091E: Thus Epicurus, and Metrodorus too, suppose {that the middle is the summit and the end} when they take the position that escape from ill is the reality and upper limit of the good.

Plutarch whines about this "escape from evil" and the memory of this being the Epicureans' "highest good" and then turns around in other sections ([13](#)) to castigate the Epicureans for taking joy in festivals (but not in engaging in critical arguments about music and poetry):

Quote

Epicurus saith, when he pronounceth in his book called his Doubts that his wise man ought to be a lover of public spectacles and to delight above any other man in the music and shows of the Bacchanals (ἄκροάμασι καὶ θεάμασι Διονυσιακοῖς); and yet he will not admit of music problems or of the critical enquiries of [p. 177] philologists, no, not so much as at a computation. Yea, he advises such princes as are lovers of the Muses rather to entertain themselves at their feasts either with some narration of military adventures or with the importune scurrilities of drolls and buffoons, than to engage in disputes about music or in questions of poetry. For this very thing he had the face to write in his treatise of Monarchy, as if he were writing to Sardanapalus, or to Nanarus satrap of Babylon. For neither would a Hiero nor an Attalus nor an Archelaus

be persuaded to make a Euripides, a Simonides, a Melanippides, a Crates, or a Diodotus rise up from their tables, and to place such scaramuchios in their rooms as a Cardax, an Agrias, or a Callias, or fellows like Thrasonides and Thrasyleon, to make people disorder the house with hollowing and clapping.

Plutarch is all over the place, in Section 16-17 he rails against Metrodorus:

Quote

And are not Metrodorus's words something like to these when he writes to his brother thus: It is none of our business to preserve the Greeks, or to get them to bestow garlands upon us for our wit, but to eat well and drink good wine, Timocrates, so as not to offend but pleasure our stomachs. And he saith again, in some other place in the same epistles: How gay and how assured was I, when I had once learned of Epicurus the true way of gratifying my stomach; for, believe me, philosopher Timocrates, our prime good lies at the stomach. In brief, these men draw out the dimensions of their pleasures like a circle, about the stomach as a centre. And the truth is, it is impossible for those men ever to participate of generous and princely joy, such as enkindles a height of spirit in us and sends forth to all mankind an unmade hilarity and calm serenity, that have taken up a sort of life that is confined, unsocial, inhuman, and uninspired [p. 184] towards the esteem of the world and the love of mankind.

You can't have it both ways, and both Plutarch and Cicero seem to ascribe both debauchery and ascetism to the Epicurean school. It can't be both, and so it comes across as stereotyping, hyperbole, or caricature.

Post by “Cassius” of August 15, 2025 at 8:27 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

You can't have it both ways, and both Plutarch and Cicero seem to ascribe both debauchery and ascetism to the Epicurean school. It can't be both, and so it comes across as stereotyping, hyperbole, or caricature.

Yes, great point. If you're going to be consistent you can either criticize the Epicureans for pursuing gross and debauched pleasures, or criticize them for being ascetic in their view of pleasure, but you can't logically criticize them for both.

And when you try to accuse them of both, you expose yourself to the question: "*Are you lying to me when you accuse them of asceticism, or are you lying when you accuse them of debauchery?*"

Given that their sublime Plato specifically endorses "noble lying," I'd wager that both are lies, and I would also wager it to be a lie when Cicero accuses Epicurus of never endorsing the pleasures of literature, history, current events, and poetry:

[Quote from On Ends Book 1:VII](#)

What pleasure do you, O Torquatus, what pleasure does this Triarius derive from literature, and history, and the knowledge of events, and the reading of poets, and his wonderful recollection of such numbers of verses? And do not say to me, Why all these things are a pleasure to me. So, too, were those noble actions to the Torquati. Epicurus never asserts this in this manner; nor would you, O Triarius, nor any man who had any wisdom, or who had ever imbibed those principles. And as to the question which is often asked, why there are so many Epicureans—there are several reasons; but this is the one which is most seductive to the multitude, namely, that people imagine that what he asserts is that those things which are right and honourable do of themselves produce joy, that is, pleasure. Those excellent men do not perceive that the whole system is overturned if that is the case. For if it were once granted, even although there were no reference whatever to the body, that these things were naturally and intrinsically pleasant; then virtue and knowledge would be intrinsically desirable. And this is the last thing which he would choose to admit.

Cicero's argument there needs more examination. I take it Cicero is arguing that Epicurus could not admit that mental pleasures are desirable apart from the body because to do so would be to admit that the mind can generate pleasure apart from the body, and Epicurus insists that all pleasures are bodily, so to admit that the mind can generate pleasure (implicitly by itself) would be to overturn the whole system.

At least one answer to that, however, is that Epicurus' point is that both the body and mind are material, and that the problem is the Platonists et al. trying to insist that the mind can exist or do things without the body. Epicurus never denies that it is perfectly appropriate and acceptable to talk at some times about the activities of the body and at other times about the activities of the mind. Epicurus simply denies that the mind can exist without the body, and so the pleasures of both go hand in hand and require each other.

Does anyone see Cicero as arguing something else beyond what is addressed by that response? Or are there better ways to respond to what Cicero argues in the last part of that passage?

Post by “Don” of August 16, 2025 at 12:26 AM

Cassius really has done a great service in this outline. Kudos to you.

I also think it's important to put Plutarch into context temporally:

- Epicurus 341-270 BCE
- Colotes c. 320 – after 268 BCE
- Cicero (for additional context): 106 - 43 BCE
 - Cicero was writing his philosophical works around 150 years before Plutarch.
- Plutarch c. 40 - c. 120s CE

Plutarch is complaining about a work written by someone (Colotes) who lived around 350 years before him!! Don't forget in all this Colotes has been dead a loooong time before Plutarch started whining about his work. This also shows the stature in which Colotes work was obviously held, likely among the Epicurean school, for it to have survived intact for Plutarch to complain about it. Colotes' work was probably composed around the 270s BCE. Plutarch was writing around the 100 CE.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

There are 31 sections in this text, and to help organize the discussion here is a single sentence condensing each one. Links are to the Perseus edition:

1. [1](#) Colotes has written a book "That It Is Impossible To Live According to the Tenets of The Other Philosophers" and this will be in response.
2. [2](#) The speakers will respond to the Epicureans' name-calling against the other philosophers, and prove that it impossible to live pleasantly according to the philosophy of Epicurus.

I decided to go over to Plutarch's *Against Colotes* and see what Colotes actually said (well, said according to Plutarch) and what were some of his responses. I find it amusing that Plutarch says that (Impossible 2) he will show that "it is impossible to live a pleasurable life according to their tenets," but Colotes evidently contended that it was impossible to live, no qualifiers, according to the other philosophers. Colotes was saying one couldn't live one's life. In *Against Colotes*, Plutarch says "And our parents indeed have, with the assistance of the Gods, given us our life; but *to live well comes to us from reason*, which we have learned from the philosophers, *which favors law and justice*, and restrains our concupiscence. Now *to live well is to live sociably, friendly, temperately, and justly*; of all which conditions they leave us not one, who cry out that man's sovereign good lies in his belly, and that they would not purchase all the virtues together at the expense of a cracked farthing, if pleasure were totally and on every side removed from

them."

I don't think Epicurus or Colotes would deny that living pleasurably entails law, justice, sociability, friendliness, temperance, and acting justly. Heck. One of the PDs says this outright. Plutarch (and Cicero) have to set up a straw man to "take down" Epicurus.

In *Against Colotes* (AC, from here on out), Plutarch says "the Epicureans reproach the other philosophers, that by their wisdom they bereave man of his life; whilst the others on the contrary accuse them of teaching men to live degenerately and like beasts." Again, straw man.

Colotes appears to be going hard against the Skeptics. Plutarch quotes him as saying 'These deny that there is a man, a horse, a wall; but say that they themselves (as it were) become walls, horses, men,' or 'are impressed with the images of walls, horses, or men.' Colotes is striking hard at those who say a man, a horse, a wall don't exist. If they take that position, they literally can't live.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

3. [3](#) The Epicureans base their claim to pleasure in the body, a "poor, rotten, and unsure" thing that experiences more pains than pleasures, both in terms of intensity and duration, and yet Epicurus has made "the removal of all that pains the common definition of pleasure."

4. [4](#) Epicurus' emphasis on mental pleasure is of no avail to him, because when he talks about mental pleasures he focuses on memory of bodily pleasures, and these are only an empty shadow - a dream - a fume - of the body's pleasure.

5. [5](#) Mental pleasures cannot rid us of bodily pains, as we see from the fact that the Epicureans themselves suffered diseases such as strangury, gripes, consumptions and dropsies; and life in this condition cannot really be pleasant, as they claim.

No Epicurean ever said mental pleasures rid one of bodily pains. The strangury etc are obvious jabs against Epicurus. Epicurus never said his pain went away. He said he could do battle with it with his memories of, basically, a life well-lived. His memories gave him joy in the midst of pain. Plutarch's being a jerk.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

6. [6](#) Just like the Epicureans claim that the unjust man lives in fear of punishment, they too must live in fear of bodily pain.

7. [7](#) It is ridiculous for the Epicureans to argue that when all pain is driven out there is no further room for pleasure, and that to be without pain makes them equal to the gods -even the brute animals sing and fly about after they have satisfied their longings, and

Epicurus would deny us even that!

Epicurus doesn't deny us anything. While we need to make prudent choices of what to pursue and from what to flee (and I use 'flee' on purpose just to poke [Cassius](#) a little 😊), pleasure is good and Epicurus doesn't deny variations in pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

8. [8](#) Those things that we require for life do not deserve the name of good, nor even the name of pleasure, any more than does a rogue's freedom from being in jail, and even brute animals are free from the worries of hell or gods - and yet Epicurus praises such freedom so highly!

9. [9](#) The bodily pleasures and memories of them are but slight, and have nothing in them that is great and considerable like that which comes from the contemplative and active and heroic aspects of life.

10. [10](#) The pleasures of the body, or memories of our dead friends, are nothing in comparison with the pleasures of the mind that come from contemplating Homer or Xenophon.

LOL!! "And who could take greater satisfaction either *in eating when a-hungry or drinking when a-dry amongst the Phaeacians*, than in going over Ulysses's relation of his own voyage and rambles? And what man could be better pleased *with the embraces of the most exquisite beauty*, than with sitting up all night to read over what Xenophon hath written of Panthea, or Aristobulus of Timoclea, or Theopompus of Thebe?" Personally, I'd take eating and drinking among the Phaeacians and the embraces of beauty... unless one is in the mood for Ulysses or Xenophon. Epicurus doesn't lay down dictates on this kind of choice. Whichever would lead to more pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

11. [11](#) The Epicureans chase away the pleasures of mathematics and history and geometry and music and the like, and these are far more pleasurable than the pleasures of the body.

"The bare contemplating and comprehending of these now engender in the learners both unspeakable delights and a marvellous height of spirit." Plutarch, my man, you're describing taking pleasure in something! LOL "comparing with these the fulsome debauchees of victualling-houses and stews" Straw man alert!!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

12. [12](#) Epicurus bids us to set sail and fly from these greater pleasures of liberal arts, mathematics, poets, and especially history, which was derided by Metrodorus, in favor of grosser pleasures of the body.

Plutarch quotes Metrodorus: "Wherefore let it never disturb you, if you know not either what side Hector was of, or the first verses in Homer's Poem, or again what is in its middle." If one knows or doesn't know what's in the Iliad, it need not disturb them... Don't worry about a cadre of snooty elite philosophers who want to look down their nose at you for not knowing it.

That's enough for now. I'll come back and put some notes in for the other sections possibly later. I'm just getting a bunch of sour grapes from Plutarch and his ilk, setting up straw men and knocking them down.

Post by "Don" of August 16, 2025 at 1:09 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

13. 13 Epicurus was particularly hypocritical in disdaining the discussion or study of music and poetry, since he himself said that the wise man will love the music of public events.

It seems to me, the epicureans could take pleasure in the performance and not need to listen to critical analysis or music theory. The Epicureans right from Epicurus took pleasure in the festivals, including music and drama as I remember. Plutarch seems to be saying it's more pleasurable to critique and analyze? Hmmm, I don't think I agree with that.

On a separate note: In Against Colotes, Plutarch writes

Quote

And they write in express terms: 'We are to treat how a man may best keep and preserve the end of Nature, and how he may from the very beginning avoid entering of his own free will and voluntarily upon offices of magistracy, and government over the people.' And yet again, these other words are theirs: 'There is no need at all that a man should tire out his mind and body to preserve the Greeks, and to obtain from them a crown of wisdom; but to eat and drink well, O Timocrates, without prejudicing, but rather pleasing the flesh.'

This goes to the *lathe biosas* issue, but putting here for further comment later so I don't lose it.

Post by “Bryan” of August 16, 2025 at 2:10 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It seems to me, the epicureans could take pleasure in the performance and not need to listen to critical analysis or music theory.

Yes, and *not only* not take part in music theory -- but also not learn to play an instrument.

P.Herc. 1578 fr. 20, Philodemus (Translated, I think, by D. Blank):

"It is typical of small-minded people with nothing worthwhile to which they can dedicate themselves, let alone which would make them happy, to toil over learning (to play music) in order to amuse themselves now and again, people who do not see the abundance of public performances or the possibility of partaking in them all the time around the city, if they want to do so, and who do not consider that our nature refuses (to listen to music) for too long and quickly tires of it."

Post by “Don” of August 16, 2025 at 2:16 PM

So, is Philodemus saying we *shouldn't* learn to play or just that we don't *have to* learn to play?

I'm assuming he'd think someone needs to learn how to play if there are public performances to enjoy?

Post by “Bryan” of August 16, 2025 at 3:02 PM

I think it is all in the "toil" over a joy that is only "now and again."

If I enjoy playing an instrument, and it is "low toil" and "frequent joy," then I am not his target.

I enjoy playing my banjo (*looking into getting a bouzouki*) -- but really only at the very end of the day when I have given my greater mental energy to greater things. I do not learn songs, only improvise, every second that I play *is* the song.

Post by “Don” of August 16, 2025 at 11:24 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

14. 14 Given that we have both a mind and a body, it is ridiculous for Epicurus to place the good entirely in the body, and say that the mind has no good of its own.

Plutarch maintains there's a body and there's a soul (mind), σώματος καὶ ψυχῆς, and they have very different desires and pleasure they experience. Epicurus on the other hand acknowledges they are inextricably linked with one relying on the other.

It's obvious too that Plutarch is vehemently against seeing the gods as irrelevant to one's life in the sense of having blessings come from them or to fear being cursed by the gods. Plutarch sees the gods as being indispensable in living properly. Epicureans obviously threw him into apoplectic rage! He must have saw the school as an extreme danger to society and worked hard to stamp out the Gardens influence. Plutarch goes on a while about the Deity both in Nonne posse and Against Colotes.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

25. 25 Since Epicurus said that fear of punishment is a bad thing, and it helps men refrain from doing evil if they fear punishment from the gods, men would be better off if they were more superstitious so that they feared the gods and punishment after death even more than they do, and thus refrained from doing evil.

The way Plutarch puts it ...

Quote

And Epicurus is of opinion that the only proper means to keep men from doing ill is the fear of punishments. So that we should cram them with more and more superstition still, and raise up against them terrors, chasms, frights, and surmises, both from heaven and earth, if their being amazed with such things as these will make them become the more tame and gentle. For it is more for their benefit to be restrained from criminal actions by the fear of what comes after death, than to commit them and then to live in perpetual danger and fear.

So religion is a tool to keep people afraid of punishment after death.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

27. 27 The belief that we cease to exist at death is demoralizing and dispiriting and thus prevents us from enjoying life.

This one really annoys me. Plutarch says

Quote

Wherefore they must needs cut the very throats of them that shall with Epicurus tell them, We men were born once for all, and we cannot be born twice, but our not being must last for ever. *For this will bring them to slight their present good as little*, or rather indeed as nothing at all compared with everlastingness, and therefore to let it pass unenjoyed and to become wholly negligent of virtue and action

The emphasized line is aggravating! So understanding that one ceases to exist should not -- does not-- slight the present!! It makes it all the more special and precious.

Plutarch also denigrates the memory of loved ones...

Quote

If then (as Epicurus saith) the remembrance of a dead friend be a thing every way complacent; we may easily from thence imagine how great a joy they deprive themselves of who [p. 200] think they do but embrace and pursue the phantoms and shades of their deceased familiars, that have in them neither knowledge nor sense, but who never expect to be with them again, or to see their dear father and dear mother and sweet wife, nor have any hopes of that familiarity and dear converse they have that think of the soul with Pythagoras, Plato, and Homer.

I don't expect to "converse" with my deceased loved ones , but remembering times with them brings me joy. I can accept they're not living in the afterlife, and it doesn't diminish the pleasure of recollection. So, with all due respect, *Bite me, Plutarch, you insufferable jerk!* Egads!

Post by "Don" of August 17, 2025 at 6:01 AM

[Plutarch \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Plutarch was a prominent citizen and even the priest of Apollo at Delphi, being instrumental in reviving and reconstructing the site. He traveled extensively, and was a strong proponent and student of Plato's philosophy.

Plutarch's anti-Stoic and anti-Epicurean writings "are often captious and in many instances betray a less than fair engagement with the views being opposed (see Warren 2011, 290–293 but also Kechagia 2011, 135–294 for a vindication of Plutarch's polemics in *Against Colotes*)."

"both Stoicism and Epicureanism were still thriving, mainly in virtue of their ethics. Plutarch wanted to show that Stoic and Epicurean ethics rest on mistaken assumptions about human nature and reality, which render their ethical doctrines useless"

"Two further features of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy appear to annoy Plutarch considerably: first, their dismissal of the aporetic/dialectical spirit that Socrates embodies, and which Plutarch regards as central to Plato's philosophy and also to his teacher's Ammonius (*De E* 385C; see also below sections 2, 3), and second, the Stoic and Epicurean adoption of a corporealist or materialist metaphysics and their rejection of the intelligible realm (that comprises God, Forms, intellects, souls), which was essential to Platonism."

"Ironically, perhaps, Plutarch's polemical writings are of great value for us today also for the many quotations they contain from Stoics, Epicurus, and other authors whose works were not preserved into modern times, and for his reports and paraphrases of their views drawn from works no longer available to us. Were it not for Plutarch, our grasp of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy would be much less extensive than it is, and our ability to reconstruct and appreciate their ideas much reduced."

Post by "Cassius" of August 19, 2025 at 10:24 AM

This podcast will be out either later today or tomorrow at the latest. One note I want to make before finishing the edit is that there is a particular segment that I think can be highly useful to us in future Zoom meetings, probably also on the twentieth.

Here is [a segment from Non Posse 7](#), with the speaker sarcastically attacking the Epicureans:

Quote

Have they not reason, think you, to value themselves for such things as these, and to talk as they are wont when they style themselves immortals and equals to Gods?—and when, through the excessiveness and transcendency of the blessed things they enjoy, they rave even to the degree of whooping and hollowing for very satisfaction that, to

the shame of all mortals, they have been the only men that could find out this celestial and divine good that lies in an exemption from all evil.

There's more before and after this quote that makes it clear that Plutarch is trying to caricature the Epicureans for praising absence of pain so highly, and I think the proper response is to caricature him right back.

Plutarch thinks it is a persuasive argument to say that Epicurus held that the goal and best thing to do in life is sip a little water and nibble a bit of cheese.

That's hogwash, and Plutarch knows it.

The absurdity of saying that Epicurus taught this is obvious, but the even greater absurdity is that so many modern Epicureans have accepted this characterization as accurate.

Sarcasm can be used by all sides to this debate, and I am going to make it a standard part of my discussion of Epicurean philosophy to play act examples of this absurdity. Neither my life nor Epicurus' nor any other Epicureans' life is summed up in the act of nibbling cheese or sipping water, but to act as if it is will serve to illustrate the absurdity of it. For those who are willing to see the absurdity, caricaturing it by taking Plutarch's argument to its literal extreme --- whooping and hollering about the ecstatic experience of a sip of water or a bite of cheese -- will help break down one of the worst misrepresentations of Epicurean teaching.

Post by “Cassius” of August 19, 2025 at 6:33 PM

Episode 295 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today our episode is entitled: "Plutarch's Absurd Interpretation of Epicurean Absence of Pain." Thanks to Don for stepping in during Joshua's absence and contributing to this important episode!

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/67447827/media>

Post by “Bryan” of August 20, 2025 at 11:41 AM

Great episode -- Thank you!

Post by “Rolf” of August 21, 2025 at 3:45 AM

Listening now, nice to hear from Don!

“Animals don’t just sit and do nothing after they’ve eaten, drank, slept. They fly around and play and sing.”

Why is this not a good argument against the Epicurean view of pleasure/absence of pain? If the animals have satiated all of their desires/removed all of their pain, should they not sit around and do nothing at that point?

Is it because boredom is a pain? Is it because they’re working to ensure that their pleasure continues and protect themselves against future pains? Is it because pleasure still feels good (and is still *the good*) even when we have no *need* of more?

I understand that absence of pain = fullness of pleasure, since the feelings are only two. I understand that “absence of pain” does not exist as some platonic ideal, but is a term pointing to real-world experiences. However, my cogs are still a little stuck on the logic of *why* we should or want to pursue further pleasures once our hunger and thirst are satiated. I feel I understand the concept but am having trouble holding it succinctly in my mind.

Post by “Rolf” of August 21, 2025 at 3:46 AM

To put my confusion in other terms: I feel I have all the pieces scattered in my mind, but am having trouble putting them together concisely and cleanly.

Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2025 at 4:30 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

To put my confusion in other terms: I feel I have all the pieces scattered in my mind, but am having trouble putting them together concisely and cleanly.

Bless you Rolf because you have just illustrated how much of a problem this is and how many people are finding it hard to "get it" in regard to this issue. You've been here for months and been asking questions and reading and you are extremely quick and yet this still bothers you.

Sometimes I think that some of us don't appreciate nearly enough the extent of this problem.

There is nothing more important we can do than hammer on this issue over and over again.

I expect that what you are doing is what most normal people are doing in the brief period that they entertain Epicurus before discarding him.

They take "absence of pain" in a way that is to them literal - they feel pain of body or mind, and they think that Epicurus means "find any way possible to anesthetize yourself from those pains and you automatically assume to the bliss of the gods."

That's what I hear when I read:

If the animals have satiated all of their desires/removed all of their pain, should they not sit around and do nothing at that point?

Not if their goal is the fullness of pleasure in all of the many ways that are accessible to us. No one ever said that all pleasures are the same. As stated in [PD09](#), pleasures vary in intensity, duration, and parts of the body (and mind) affected.

Do you really think that Epicurus himself saw no difference between the pleasure of trimming his fingernails and the pleasure of (for example) sex or music or dancing or intense engagement in philosophic exchange?

I doubt you think he saw no difference between those things, and yet you feel compelled to take "absence of pain" as if everything condenses down into a state of anesthesia where you feel nothing.

I'd wager there's a connection between this and your prior flirtation with anti-natalism --and I'd look for a commonality in the issue of one's basic evaluation of whether the most important aspect of life is pleasure or suffering.

I'm not going to argue with someone (I'm talking in the abstract, not to you) who is fully persuaded that life is suffering and misery and they'd rather themselves had never been born or anyone else either. That's a highly negative view of life and I know that some people's life experiences can seem to justify that conclusion.

But there is no fate or necessity of supernatural force that requires such a conclusion, and many many people find ways out of terrible situations to conclude that life is definitely worth living, just as Epicurus described how life is desirable and made similar statements in the letter to Menoeceus and throughout his work.

Plutarch and Cicero and the religious enemies of Epicurus have latched onto the "absence of pain" discussion to turn Epicurus' entire philosophy upside down, and sad for me to say but it seems like today it's almost as negative a force as Buddhism or similar eastern attitudes which emphasize suffering as the driving focus of life.

We're in a period of depression and cynicism where those attitudes have taken over the world, but that's not going to last. The depressed and cynical generations that are spoiled from their luxuries and no longer have any idea what is required to maintain happiness are going to pass away, and in the rubble they leave behind younger people are going to see that happiness requires effort and focus and a positive outlook on life.

it bothers me that so many good people are being flushed down the drain along with those who should know better but don't, and I think the right response is the kind of attitude Diogenes of Oinoanda showed in describing the majority of society as like sick sheep catching disease from one another.

"Absence of pain" has a philosophical context and a clear explanation as the description of a life which is so full of pleasures that there is no longer any room in that life for any pains. But that does NOT mean life drained of all positive active joyful and delightful activities of body and mind. It means just the opposite - it means a life full of those things.

And it's the height of outrageousness that the forces which advocate "tranquility" above pleasure have been so successful in persuading even young people that "absence of pain" implies a state that is indistinguishable from "nothingness."

[Quote from Rolf](#)

"Animals don't just sit and do nothing after they've eaten, drank, slept. They fly around and play and sing."

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Is it because boredom is a pain? Is it because they're working to ensure that their pleasure continues and protect themselves against future pains? Is it because pleasure still feels good (and is still the good) even when we have no need of more?

I understand that absence of pain = fullness of pleasure, since the feelings are only two. I understand that "absence of pain" does not exist as some platonic ideal, but is a term pointing to real-world experiences. However, my cogs are still a little stuck on the logic of why we should or want to pursue further pleasures once our hunger and thirst are satiated. I feel I understand the concept but am having trouble holding it succinctly in my mind.

Post by “Rolf” of August 21, 2025 at 7:07 AM

Thanks for your reply Cassius! Would it be accurate to say then that once our basic (natural necessary) desires are satisfied, it is no longer pain or lack that drives us to pleasure but pleasure itself?

I feel this sort of relates to the question I posed a little while ago about why we should pursue unnecessary desires if necessary desires are enough. Epicurus was, among other things, a researcher of human behaviour. Why is it that we still pursue superfluous pleasurable sensations once we have reached the limit of pleasure (absence of pain)?

To be very clear, I don't disagree with the conclusions here. But the fact that the clock displays the correct time is not enough for me - I must know how it ticks!

Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2025 at 7:40 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Thanks for your reply Cassius! Would it be accurate to say then that once our basic (natural necessary) desires are satisfied, it is no longer pain or lack that drives us to pleasure but pleasure itself?

I feel this sort of relates to the question I posed a little while ago about why we should pursue unnecessary desires if necessary desires are enough. Epicurus was, among other things, a researcher of human behaviour. Why is it that we still pursue superfluous pleasurable sensations once we have reached the limit of pleasure (absence of pain)?

To be very clear, I don't disagree with the conclusions here. But the fact that the clock displays the correct time is not enough for me - I must know how it ticks!

That's the best possible attitude Rolf. I've seen so many people start and then drop the study of Epicurus, and I am convinced this is the main problem. Most people don't seem willing to question the authorities on how the "authorities" say Epicurus' view of happiness works, so they only hear an upside down version and give up trying to make sense of it to find out how it really ticks. They get tired of anesthesia, which is all that is offered in the word "tranquility," and they

eventually walk away.

And as I have said before, if I thought what your question suggests about "absence of pain" was the correct interpretation of Epicurus, I would shut down this forum in an instant.

Would it be accurate to say then that once our basic (natural necessary) desires are satisfied, it is no longer pain or lack that drives us to pleasure but pleasure itself?

To this I would say that it is ALWAYS pleasure that drives us to pursue pleasure. Pain can be viewed as the absence of pleasure just like pleasure is the absence of pain.

Your question displays exactly why there is so much fixation on the "natural and necessary" categorization. People act as if Epicurus said that all you need is a little air and bread and water and you ARE living like a god. What he said was that HE was able to compete with the gods even if that was all HE had, but what HE was suggesting HE could do does not mean that any particular Tom, Dick, Benjamin, or Mohammed on the street would see the same result with only bread and water and air.

In the case of Epicurus, HE was able to say that it as a greatly happy day for HIM even when he was dying a very painful death because HE could stack against that pain the memory and thoughts of what HE had accomplished and experienced in HIS life to that point. Would you compare the happiness that you have experienced from philosophy to date (including your period of anti-natalism) as such an ecstatic experience that you would whoop and holler and exclaim that this memory mad it worth staying alive even as your kidneys were exploding? Would a child in war zone reasonably be able to say that with only bread and water and air he was living a life worthy of the gods?

I don't think so, and I don't think Epicurus would say so.

Why is it that we still pursue superfluous pleasurable sensations once we have reached the limit of pleasure (absence of pain)?

Because all pleasure is desirable, and none of it is *superfluous as long as we are able to experience it*. As we have been discussing recently the way Metrodorus stated it is that the reason we need no more pleasure after we reach "absence of pain" is that there is no more room for those pleasures in our lives, because our experience is already full of pleasures! It's not that additional pleasure is not desirable, but that under the hypothetical we do not have the capacity to experience any additional pleasure. And that's because our experience is already full of pleasures of every kind, mental and bodily, and there is no "empty spot" - no extra time or attention - into which to inject new pleasurable experiences.

Is your experience full to the brim when you have a little water and air and water? Mine is not, and I hope to live a significant number of additional time and experience more pleasures that I can reasonably hope to experience.

In the case of Epicurus on his last day, given his circumstances and what he had accomplished, calling yourself happy is very reasonable, because Epicurus understood what he had accomplished and how his time was coming to an end because his body was wearing out. But are you in your 20's satisfied that all you need for the rest of your life is bread, water, air, sleep ---- and rinse and repeat that cycle and nothing else for the next 80 years?

Of course not! You want to experience all the mental and bodily pleasures that your particular situation (health, abilities, etc.) allows you to experience! Why would any reasonable person choose to look at everything above a subsistence level of existence as "superfluous"!?!?

But that's exactly what the "frenemies" of Epicurus have succeeded in making you think is Epicurean philosophy. It's detestable that this has become an accepted manner of thinking.

This now commonly accepted view of Epicurus (that he deprives us of singing and dancing and having fun) is an ATTACK on Epicurus. Yet many defenders of Epicurus have ACCEPTED this sarcastic argument of Plutarch and tried to turn it into a strength!

What dolts they are -- Plutarch and Cicero both gave them enough credit to think that any person of normal common sense hearing their argument would run like the wind from a philosophy that drains all joy and delight out of life. But what happened? Plutarch's and Cicero's sarcasm was over the years EMBRACED (after the true Epicureans had been suppressed) to the point where it has now become the majority modern accepted interpretation of Epicurus!!!

To me the antidote starts back with tracing back where these arguments came from in the first place, and why they proved effective.

Epicurus was always focused on PLEASURE, and he made very clear that his definition of pleasure includes all common pleasures. Full stop - no ranking of pleasures on an absolute scale as some "always" better than others.

The major innovation that Epicurus added to the view of pleasure was to expand it to include all mental and bodily experiences that are not painful. And he did so for a reason that is the very opposite of those who despair about life and about children and who chose to focus on suffering.

Epicurus said that life itself is desirable and pleasurable, given how short it is, and that we should view it as our most valuable possession and make the most out of it that we can.

But does that mean that all any random mystical anti-natalist has to do is drug himself into a stupor to the point he doesn't feel anything mental or bodily, and by that action he becomes as happy as a god?

Heck no - such a person remains the same miserable creature he was before he drugged himself out of existence.

It is possible for someone (like Epicurus) to compete with a god, even in austere conditions, because as Epicurus said he found his joy in the study of nature, and in Epicurus' case he knew what he had accomplished. His friends were numbered in whole cities and as a result of his work he had come to be living in what has to be interpreted as relatively wealthy circumstances. People who are destitute don't own multiple properties and multiple slaves and have admiring women and students and friends surrounding and supporting them up to their last breath.

So the ultimate proof of the error of the view Plutarch has promoted is that EPICURUS HIMSELF DID NOT LIVE LIKE THAT! Epicurus was as capable as any philosopher of embracing hypothetical examples, and using hyperbole such as living on bread and water, to dramatize and illustrate philosophical points.

But how did Epicurus actually live? All you have to do is read his will to realize that Epicurus did NOT live a life from which singing and dancing and joy and delight had been banished.

But that interpretation of "absence of pain" is an argument Plutarch thinks some people are stupid enough to fall for. And the bitter truth is that people have proved that they are far more stupid than Plutarch gave them credit for being! Plutarch must be laughing in his grave to realize that he's helped destroy Epicurean philosophy - not by convincing people that it *deprives* them of pleasure they could otherwise have, but by convincing them that Epicurean philosophy isn't about pleasure at all!

Post by "Rolf" of August 21, 2025 at 8:28 AM

Will read through above response when I get home. For now, just wanted to add another question that points to this issue: Why do we seek variation of pleasure? Why should we seek variation of pleasure?

Post by "Rolf" of August 21, 2025 at 8:29 AM

Another one: How would you respond to confusion about absence of pain in a single clear and concise paragraph?

Post by "Rolf" of August 21, 2025 at 9:51 AM

Great response Cassius. That said, I feel we may be talking past each other a little.

1) I don't hold anti-natalist views, and I haven't done for years. I don't see it as my philosophical base whatsoever.

And more importantly,

2) I had absolutely zero knowledge of Epicureanism before coming here. My confusion here does not stem from the mainstream false interpretations of Epicurus. I hadn't read Cicero or Plutarch, nor had I read any inaccurate modern accounts of Epicurean philosophy. While people like Cicero and Plutarch seemed to have wilfully distorted Epicurus' words, my questions about the philosophy come from a place of organic confusion. This matters because it means that I'm not struggling to break away from some prior false interpretation of the texts, but instead I'm trying to understand things from a fairly neutral standpoint. Your argument seems to focus a lot on disproving Cicero and Plutarch's falsehoods, which I already disagree with, rather than independently clarifying the Epicurean view.

I mention these points to help clarify my confusion.

Post by "Cassius" of August 21, 2025 at 9:53 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Why do we seek variation of pleasure? Why should we seek variation of pleasure?

Because nature tells us that all pleasure is pleasing and that is why it is called pleasure.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

How would you respond to confusion about absence of pain in a single clear and concise paragraph?

Epicurus considered "absence of pain" to be a philosophical term which describes the condition of any part of the body or mind, or of one's life as a whole, from which pain is absent. We need this general term because everyone's circumstances are different, but we still need a logical and understandable objective. Once you identify that all of life resolves into two feelings (pleasure and pain), and you choose to view your experience as a whole as a jar to be filled, it

becomes logically obvious that the most desirable life possible is that in which the jar is filled with pleasures. Stating that your goal is "absence of pain" is the same as stating that your goal is "pleasure." Neither term implies that you are limiting your choice of pleasures to a particular physical or mental activity, and you are certainly not going to limit it to a subsistence minimum when more desirable pleasures are available. All pleasures are desirable, but some pleasures are more desirable than others. The proper goal is to set out to fill your experience (your jar of life) with the most pleasant combination of pleasures possible for you. Consideration of "natural and necessary" desires does not undermine this viewpoint, but supports it. Every step along the way of pursuing a jar full of pleasures, this consideration provides a rule of thumb that is not absolute but provides guidance as to which choices are most likely to lead to more pain than pleasure.

Post by "Cassius" of August 21, 2025 at 9:59 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

2) I had absolutely zero knowledge of Epicureanism before coming here. My confusion here does not stem from the mainstream false interpretations of Epicurus. I hadn't read Cicero or Plutarch, nor had I read any inaccurate books on Epicurean philosophy. While people like Cicero and Plutarch seemed to have wilfully distort Epicurus' words, my questions about the philosophy come from a place of organic confusion. This matters because it means that I'm not struggling to break away from some prior false interpretation of the texts, but instead I'm trying to understand things from a fairly neutral standpoint. Your argument seems to focus a lot on disproving Cicero and Plutarch's falsehoods, which I already disagree with, rather than independently clarifying the Epicurean view.

Yes I follow you and I think that's important. It's a remark that is kind of like Dave's perfectly correct comment to the effect that every quantum scientist is not a mystic in disguise.

All it takes is reading the letter to Menoeceus without any prior or other reading whatsoever and you're thrown headlong into this confusion.

That's because if we start and stop with that letter we are taking Epicurus' words out of context, and not accounting for the circumstance that Epicurus was writing for students who wanted summaries to make things easier to remember, but who were otherwise very familiar and had intimate access to his full views. For example, [PD03](#) about the limit of the quantity of pleasure, and their inability to co-exist (and therefore there are only two options) is not spelled out in the letter to Menoeceus, but is essential background to avoid this confusion about

"absence of pain."

You're not more confused than most other new readers. You're doing what most new readers fail to do -- rather than walk away from the obvious omissions from the letter and accepting apparent contradictions or even mysticism, you're seeing how that interpretation makes no sense and that it's essential to bring the full picture into focus so that this part can be understood.

Post by “Don” of August 21, 2025 at 11:50 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That's because if we start and stop with that letter we are taking Epicurus' words out of context, and not accounting for the circumstance that Epicurus was writing for students who wanted summaries to make things easier to remember, but who were otherwise very familiar and had intimate access to his full views.

That's one reason I wrote My translation and commentary of that letter, to provide some context, both historically and philosophically. I need to give that a thorough reread and maybe do an updated edition. It's been a few years now.

Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2025 at 12:09 PM

It's definitely easy to see why Cicero and Plutarch would come up with this argument, because it can be made to look ridiculous due to lack of context. More troubling for me than that they chose the argument is that they got so far with it. No doubt these are the kinds of questions that the book(s) on the "goal" from which Cicero was quoting would have cleared up these issues, so their loss is particularly damaging.

Post by “Pacatus” of August 21, 2025 at 2:08 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Is your experience full to the brim when you have a little water and air and water? Mine is not, and I hope to live a significant number of additional time and experience more pleasures that I can reasonably hope to experience.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurus did NOT live a life from which singing and dancing and joy and delight had been banished.



Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2025 at 3:32 PM

I think there's a problem related to what Rolf is asking about that needs our best response. Here's an effort to describe that problem and give a provisional answer:

"If it's so easy, Epicurus, to caricature your philosophy to make it seem like the opposite of pleasure, don't you think you have a problem with the way you're saying it?"

There's a section of Frances Wright's chapter ten, especially the part I underlined below, that makes a similar point, where she has Epicurus say:

"Zeno, in his present speech, has rested much of the truth of his system on its expediency; I, therefore, shall do the same by mine. The door to my gardens is ever open, and my books are in the hands of the public; to enter, therefore, here, into the detail or the expounding of the principles of my philosophy, were equally out of place and out of season. 'Tell us not that that is right which admits of evil construction; that that is virtue which leaves an open gate to vice.' This is the thrust which Zeno now makes at Epicurus; and did it hit, I grant it were a mortal one. From the flavour, we pronounce of the fruit; from the beauty and the fragrance, of the flower; and in a system of morals, or of philosophy, or of whatever else, what tends to produce good we pronounce to be good, what to produce evil, we pronounce to be evil."

I think part of the answer to this question would include referring to [VS29](#). (Bailey) "In investigating nature I would prefer to speak openly and like an oracle to give answers serviceable to all mankind, even though no one should understand me, rather than to conform

to popular opinions and so win the praise freely scattered by the mob.”

I don't think Epicurus expected that his letter to Menoecus would survive isolated from his other ethical works on the End, and his works on the Canon and On Nature and so forth. When he wanted to distill his ethical philosophy down to its core essence, he chose to include in [PD03](#) the key fundamental point which is not stated so bluntly in the Letter to Menoecus: [PD03](#). *The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.*

If the [Principal Doctrines](#) had survived and the Letter to Menoecus had not, I don't think we'd be in nearly the same situation we are now. We'd still have knowledge that absence of pain is a crucial concept, but we wouldn't be dealing with the confusion caused by saying in isolation that when all pain is gone we have no need for pleasure. That statement makes sense only when you realize that it means that we have no *further* need for *more* pleasure because our experience is already full of pleasures. We haven't gotten rid of pleasure along with pain, we'll filled our experience with all our own personal combination of those mental and physical experiences that everyone recognizes as pleasure, along with those other experiences of health and stability that everyone *doesn't but should* also recognize as pleasure.

If you keep [PD03](#) firmly in mind as the starting point, and you realize that it's being stated as the third most important thing to know in the whole philosophy, more important even than a statement that Pleasure is the goal of life, it's easier to see that there's something special about this formulation which has to be treated like an axiom never to be contradicted. With [PD03](#) in mind you know that pleasure and pain cannot coexist in the same space, and that no more pleasure can be added when all pain has been removed.

And if you know anything about the major philosophical debates of the age, you know that this addresses the major objection to holding Pleasure to be the greatest good that had been stated by the opposing philosophers: that pleasure can always be made better by adding more, and that therefore pleasure can never be properly viewed as full or complete. You don't need to be told that Pleasure is desirable, because no one in their right mind would assert that (even though the Stoics and others moved in that direction). What you needed most of all to be told is that there is an answer to the anti-Pleasure logic problem, and that the answer to the logic problem is that Pleasure when viewed as "Absence of Pain" cannot be improved - there is no "better" than can be reached by adding more pleasure when your experience is already completely full of pleasure because you have removed all non-pleasurable experiences.

This is the key philosophical answer which Epicurus' formulations was targeted at explaining. Epicurus was aware that he could and would be misconstrued and misrepresented, but he also knew that nothing will satisfy that type of person. The most important thing was to provide the key *for those who are capable of figuring the problem out*. No doubt in other places he did explain the issues in more plain and simple terms, but it appears confusing to us because from Epicurus' own hands only one letter on ethics and a list of key doctrines survives.

That's one way I would begin to answer someone who legitimately asks *Why didn't he state this more clearly and why does this have to be so confusing?*

Post by “Rolf” of August 21, 2025 at 3:50 PM

I'll respond to all these fantastic responses more in depth tomorrow, but for now I just wanted to mention how much I appreciate that Epicurean philosophy is grounded in everyday reality.

Regardless of all the abstract reasoning I'm engaging in while trying to understand this point, the final judge is the senses and what I'm actually experiencing. I *know* and I can see clearly that a life of nothing but bread and water would leave me unsatisfied, despite my hunger and thirst being satiated. It is obvious to me that the pleasure of trimming my fingernails is not equivalent to the pleasure of dancing with friends.

So despite my confusion here, I don't doubt for a second the validity of the philosophy. I can be sure of this because the conclusions align with what I actually experience - the proof is in the pudding.

Even while figuring out how the clock works, I can be sure that the time it displays is accurate.

Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2025 at 4:31 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Regardless of all the abstract reasoning I'm engaging in while trying to understand this point,

Well you may have found something to say that I disagree with! 😊 I don't think your comments constitute abstract reasoning (with the implication that there's something improper about them). I think the questions you are asking are the most practical possible. If good answers do not exist to them, then Epicurean philosophy is worse than worthless.

I can't imagine much that would be worse than a philosophy that would appear to argue that the goal of life is to obsess over being anesthetized from all pain, and living with the minimum pleasure possible to sustain you. In fact, that's exactly what I strongly criticize the Stoics, Buddhists, and others for in essence advocating.

Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2025 at 4:59 PM

I've not yet made up my mind to do this, but it appears that neither Joshua nor Don are available for this weekend's podcast. While we wait on Joshua's return before going further in Tusculan Disputations, I am thinking of using this thread of comments on Episode 295 and just recording a commentary as I pick out some to talk about on the general topic of Plutarch's criticisms, especially on "absence of pain" (I will omit the names of the post writers).

So if you're considering adding a comment to this thread, please do, as that will give us more material with which to work. And to repeat, if I do this at all I'll pull out only the thrust of the comments and I won't be associating them with names of posters (other than probably Don as he made his points on the first episode).

Post by “Cassius” of August 22, 2025 at 7:03 AM

This thread is going to become a primary resource for arguments about absence of pain, so I want to include here one of the major sections by DeWitt bearing on this, from Chapter 12 of his book under the subheading "The Unity of Pleasure":

Quote

Though we certainly fall short of possessing the whole argument of Epicurus, there is ample evidence upon which to construct the skeleton of a case. The Feelings, as usual, are the criterion. It may be recalled how he proved life itself to be the greatest good by pointing out that the greatest joy is associated with the escape from some dreadful destruction. By a similar argument, even if not extant, it could be shown that the recovery of health is a positive pleasure when the individual has recently survived a perilous illness. It would be a positive pleasure also to be freshly relieved from the fear of death and the gods through the discovery of the true philosophy.

To substantiate this drift of reasoning it is not impossible to quote a text: "The stable condition of well-being in the flesh and the confident hope of its continuance means the most exquisite and infallible of joys for those who are capable of figuring the problem out." [Usener 68]

This passage marks a distinct increase of precision in the analysis of pleasure. Its import will become clear if the line of reasoning already adumbrated be properly

extended: let it be granted that the escape from a violent death is the greatest of joys and the inference must follow that the possession of life at other times cannot rank greatly lower. Similarly, if the recovery from a dangerous illness be a cause for joy, manifestly the possession of health ought to be a joy at other times. Nevertheless the two pleasures differ from one another and it was in recognition of the difference that Epicurus instituted the distinction between kinetic and static pleasures. The difference is one of intensity or, as Epicurus would have said, of condensation. At one time the pleasure is condensed, at another, extended. In other words the same pleasure may be either kinetic or static. If condensed, it is kinetic; if extended, it is static.

There is a catch to this reasoning, however; it holds good only "for those who are capable of figuring the problem out." This marks Epicurus as a pragmatist, insisting upon the control of experience, including thought. His reasoning about kinetic and static pleasures is sound, but human beings do not automatically reason after this fashion; they fail to reason about the matter at all. Although they would spontaneously admit the keenest joy at recovery from wounds or disease, they forget about the blessing of health at other times. Hence it is that Epicurus insists upon the necessity of being able to reason in this way. Moreover, this reasoning must be confirmed by habituation. The same rule applies here as in the case of "[Death is nothing to us](#)." It is not enough to master the reasons for so believing; it is also necessary to habituate one's self to so believe. [Diogenes Laertius, 10.124] This is pragmatism.

There is also another catch to this line of reasoning. The conclusion clashes with the teaching of Aristippus and Plato and it also violates the accepted usage of language. It was not usual to call the possession of health a pleasure and still less usual to call freedom from pain a pleasure. It was this objection that Cicero had in mind when he wrote: "You Epicureans round up people from all the crossroads, decent men, I allow, but certainly of no great education. Do such as they, then, comprehend what Epicurus means, while I, Cicero, do not?" [Cicero, *De Finibus*, 2.4.12-13] The common people of the ancient world, however, for whom Platonism had nothing attractive, seem to have accepted Epicurean pragmatism with gladness. Cicero, being partial to the aristocratic philosophy and having no zeal to promote the happiness of the multitude, chose to sneer.

The irritation which Cicero simulates in the above passage was beyond doubt genuine with those from whom the argument was inherited. They had been nettled by the phraseology of Epicurus, who was mocking Plato. The words "those who are capable of figuring the problem out" are a parody of Plato's *Timaeus* 40d, where the text reads "those who are incapable of making the calculations" and the reference is to mathematical calculations of the movements of the celestial bodies, which "bring fears and portents of future events" to the ignorant. Baiting the adversary was a favorite sport of Epicurus.

Epicureans at a later time were in their turn subjected to incessant baiting by Stoic opponents, and it may have been these who tried the reduction to the absurd by means of a ridiculous example. If those who are not in a state of pain are in a state of pleasure, "then the host who, though not being thirsty himself, mixes a cocktail for a guest is in the same state of pleasure as the guest who is thirsty and drinks the said cocktail." [Cicero, De Finibus, 2.5.17]

Cicero, however, had his tongue in his cheek and knew that this was mere dialectical sparring, intended rather to disconcert the opponent than to refute him. He was partial to the New Academy and to Stoicism, both of which tended to turn argumentation into a game and thus make it an end in itself. They could not fail to be intolerant of the procedures of pragmatism, of which action is the primary object and not logomachy.

This extension of the name of pleasure to freedom from fear and pain was not the sole achievement of the new analysis. In popular thought, the correctness of which Plato assumed, pleasures were classified according to the parts of the body affected, eating, drinking, sexual indulgence, philosophical thinking. In respect also of this conventional classification Epicurus exhibited finer discrimination. He not only discerned that the pleasure associated with one organ is brief and intense while that associated with other parts is moderate and extended but also observed that certain pleasures, like that of escaping a violent death, affect the whole organism.

The next step in this new analysis was to declare that this fact of extension or intension was of no fundamental importance. The high value assigned to this principle is indicated by its promulgation as Authorized Doctrine 9: "If every pleasure were alike condensed in duration and associated with the whole organism or the dominant parts of it, pleasures would never differ from one another." Positively stated, the meaning would be that pleasure is always pleasure; it is of no consequence that some pleasures are associated with the mind, others with the stomach, and others with other parts, or that some affect the whole organism and others only a part, or that some are brief and intense, others moderate and extended. In other words, it makes no difference that some pleasures are static and others kinetic. Pleasure is a unit. This unity could be expressed in ancient terminology by saying that all pleasure was a kind of motion, *kinesis* or *motio*, the ancient equivalent of reaction.

To put the colophon upon this topic it should be added that three Authorized Doctrines, Nos. 8, 9, and 10, deal with pleasure and all three imply the quality of unity. The eighth stresses the fact that the evil attaches solely to the consequences; all pleasures are alike in being good: "No pleasure is evil in itself but the practices productive of certain pleasures bring troubles in their train that by many times outweigh the pleasures themselves."

The ninth Doctrine has been quoted above. In it the item about "condensed pleasure" was pounced upon by Damoxenus of the New Comedy as a good cue for merrymaking; quite aptly he allowed a cook to dilate upon it.[Fragment 2, pages 349-350 (Kock)] Some five centuries afterward the frivolous Alciphron testified to the longevity of the theme by assuming it to be still good for a laugh.[Usener, 432]

The tenth Doctrine, last of the three, serves to shift all ethical condemnation from pleasures themselves to the consequences: "If the practices productive of the pleasures of profligates dispelled the fears of the mind about celestial things and death and pains and also taught the limit of the desires, we should never have fault to find with profligates, enjoying pleasures to the full from all quarters, and suffering neither pain nor distress from any quarter, wherein the evil lies." Such declarations afforded to enemies of Epicurus a means of besmirching his name, but he was absolutely honest; he did not evade the logical implications of his principles; he flaunted them. By disposition he was a teaser; he drew enjoyment from the squirming of the piously orthodox.

A variation of the same teaching appears in an isolated saying. "I enjoy the fullness of pleasure living on bread and water and I spit upon the pleasures of a luxurious diet, not on account of any evil in these pleasures themselves but because of the discomforts that follow upon them." [Usener, 181] The net effect of these pronouncements is to put all pleasures in a single class, all being good, irrespective of extension or condensation or of the organ affected or of approval or disapproval, which attach only to consequences. This is an instance where Epicurus exhibited deeper insight than Plato in the latter's own field, discerning the one in the many.

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Post by "Cassius" of August 22, 2025 at 7:06 AM

And even more directly DeWitt concludes his section "Pleasure Can Be Continuous" of Chapter 12 this way:

Quote

Even at the present day the same objection is raised. For instance, a modern Platonist, ill informed on the true intent of Epicurus, has this to say: "What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by emptying pleasure of all positive content?" [P. E. More, *Hellenistic Philosophies* (Princeton University Press, 1923), page 20.] This ignores the fact that this was but one

of the definitions of pleasure offered by Epicurus, that he recognized kinetic as well as static pleasures. It ignores also the fact that Epicurus took personal pleasure in public festivals and encouraged his disciples to attend them and that regular banquets were a part of the ritual of the sect. Neither does it take account of the fact that in the judgment of Epicurus those who feel the least need of luxury enjoy it most and that intervals of abstinence enhance the enjoyment of luxury.[Diogenes Laertius, 10.131] Thus the Platonic objector puts upon himself the necessity of denying that the moderation of the rest of the year furnishes additional zest to the enjoyment of the Christmas dinner; he has failed to become aware of the Epicurean zeal for "condensing pleasure."

Post by "Cassius" of August 22, 2025 at 8:02 AM

I have never previously tracked down DeWitt's reference to the P.E. More criticism, but More's book is on Archive.org and here is the relevant section in greater detail. It is very interesting and I think very helpful to read through this kind of strong denunciation of Epicurus. I am going through the full section and will post it here because it amplifies the reasoning that Don and I discussed in the podcast and which Rolf is asking about.

Post by "Cassius" of August 22, 2025 at 8:38 AM

This is a long quote but think the forum software will provide a collapsible box so it doesn't break the flow of the thread. The analysis is perverse just as DeWitt describes it, but it's well worth reading in full as an expansive interpretation in modern language of Plutarch's criticism. This is a position that is widespread and if you're a fan of Epicurus you need to understand the argument and have a position on why it is wrong. Rolf who is asking the question and Don who read Plutarch recently for the podcast will definitely see how it tracks.

[Quote from P.E. More - "Hellenistic Philosophies"](#)

The difficulty that confronts us when we try to understand Epicurus is the extraordinary paradox of his logic. What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins with regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by emptying pleasure of all positive content? There is no possibility, I think, of really reconciling this blunt

contradiction, which was sufficiently obvious to the enemies of Epicurus in antiquity, but it is possible, with the aid of Plutarch's shrewd analysis, to follow him step by step from his premises to his conclusions, and so to discover the source of his entanglement. [Note 1]

Epicurus began with the materialistic and monistic theses which had allured Aristippus, and which, mingled in varying proportions from the teaching of Heraclitus and Protagoras and Democritus, had come to be the prevailing belief of the Greek people; they were, indeed, no more than the essence refined out of the voluble lecturing and debating of the so-called sophists against whom Socrates and Plato had waged a relentless but unsuccessful warfare. This visible palpable world of bodies is the only reality, and the only thing which to man, in such a world, has any certain value is his own immediate physical sensations. Pleasure we feel and pain we feel, in their various degrees and complications; and we know that all men welcome pleasure and shrink from pain by a necessity of nature. Pleasure, in fact, is simply a name for the sensation which we do welcome, and pain for the sensation from which we do shrink. The example of infants and animals is before us to nullify any attempt to argue away this primary distinction.

These are the premises of Epicurus, as they had been of Aristippus, and to these he will cling through thick and thin, whatever their consequences may be and however they may entangle him in self-contradictions. He seems even to have gone out of his way at times to find the grossest terms to express the doctrine, whether his motive was to shock the Philistines of morality or to fortify himself and his friends in their positive belief. The avowed programme of the school was "not to save the Greeks, but to indulge the belly to the limit of safety with meat and drink"; and in a letter to a friend Epicurus says: "I invite you to continuous pleasures, not to virtues that unsettle the mind with vain and empty hopes of fruition."

The programme is simple enough in all conscience, and might satisfy the most cynical votary of the flesh, but, desiring like his predecessor to be a voluptuary, Epicurus was driven despite himself to be a philosopher, even more a philosopher than the Cyrenaic, whether his wisdom came from deeper reflection or greater timidity. His experience might be described as the opposite of that of Johnson's humble acquaintance who had been trying all his life to attain philosophy but failed because cheerfulness would break in. Aristippus could make a boast of his *Habeo, non habeo*, but, however he might twist about, his dependence on the fleeting sensation of the moment left him at last a prey to the hazards of circumstance.

Clearly the hedonist who was enough of a philosopher to aim at liberty and security must embrace a wider view of life than the Cyrenaic; and so the first step of Epicurus was to take happiness, conceived as a continuous state of pleasure, rather than

particular pleasures, for the goal. This is the initial, and perhaps the most fundamental, difference between the strictly Epicurean and the Cyrenaic brand of hedonism.

But how, taking individual pleasures still in the grossly physical sense, was a man to assure himself of their consummation in happiness? It was well to make a god of the belly and, in the Epicurean language, of any other passage of the body that admitted pleasure and not pain, but, as soon as he began to reflect, the philosopher was confronted by the ugly fact that the entrances of pain are more numerous than those of pleasure, and that the paroxysms of pain may surpass in intensity any conceivable pleasure. He saw that there was something ephemeral and insecure in the very nature of pleasure, whereas pain had terrible rights over the flesh, and could dispute her domain with a vigour far beyond the power of her antagonist. Evidently, in a world so constituted, the aim of the philosopher will be lowered from a bold search for sensations to the humbler task of attaining some measure of security against forces he cannot control; and so, I think, we shall interpret the curious phenomenon that the greatest of all hedonists was driven to a purely defensive attitude towards life.

On the one hand he knew, as Plato had shown, that the recovery from disease and the relief from anguish do bring a sense of active well-being, and hence it was possible for him to define pleasure in negative terms without seeming to contradict flagrantly his grosser views about the belly and other bodily organs. Again, since positive pleasure and pain by some law of nature are so intimately bound together that the cessation of one is associated with access of the other,[2] then, clearly, the only pleasure free of this unpleasant termination is that which is itself not positively induced but comes as the result of receding pain. For the content of happiness, therefore, the Epicurean will look to sensation of a negative sort : "The limit of pleasure is reached by the removal of all that gives pain," and "Pleasure in the flesh admits no increase, when once the pain of want is removed; it can only be variegated." [3] But the philosopher cannot stop here, Such a state of release, though in itself it may not be subject to the laws of alternative pleasure and pain, is yet open to interruption from the hazards of life. And so Epicurus, in his pursuit of happiness, is carried a step further.

Not on the present possession of pleasure, whether positive or negative, will he depend for security of happiness, but on the power of memory. Here, at least, we appear to be free and safe, for memory is our own. Nothing can deprive us of that recollected joy, "which is the bliss of solitude" ; even what was distressful at the time may often, by some alchemy of the mind, be transmuted into a happy reminiscence:

"Things which offend when present, and affright, In memory, well painted, move delight." [Note 4]

The true hedonism, then, will be a creation in the mind from material furnished it by the body. Plutarch describes the procedure of Epicurus thus, and exposes also its

inadequacy: Seeing that the field of joy in our poor bodies cannot be smooth and equal, but harsh and broken and mingled with much that is contrary, he transfers the exercise of philosophy from the flesh, as from a lean and barren soil, to the mind, in the hopes of enjoying there, as it were, large pastures and fair meadows of delight. Not in the body but in the soul is the true garden of the Epicurean to be cultivated. It might seem as if by the waving of a magic wand we had been translated from a materialistic hedonism to a region like that in which Socrates and Plato looked for unearthly happiness.

But in fact there is no such magic for the Epicurean. The source of the pleasures which compose our happiness is still physical, and only physical; the office of the soul, so-called, is merely to retain by an act of selective memory the scattered impressions of sensuous pleasure and to forestall these by an act of selective expectation. If you hear the Epicurean crying out and testifying that the soul has no power of joy and tranquility save in what it draws from the flesh, and that this is its only good, what can you say but that he uses the soul as a kind of vessel to receive the strainings from the body, as men rack wine from an old and leaky jar into a new one to take age, and so think they have done some wonderful thing.

And no doubt wine may be kept and mellowed with time, but the soul preserves no more than a feeble scent of what it takes into memory; for pleasure, as soon as it has given out one hiss in the body, forthwith expires, and that little of it which lags behind in memory is but flat and like a queasy fume, as if a man should undertake to feed himself today on the stale recollection of what he ate and drank yesterday. What the Epicureans have is but the empty shadow and dream of a pleasure that has taken wing and fled away, and that serves but for fuel to foment their untamed desires, as in sleep the unreal satisfaction of thirst and love only stings to a sharper lust of waking intemperance.

Memory, though it promise a release from the vicissitudes of fortune, is still too dependent on the facts of life, too deeply implicated in the recurrence of passionate desires. There is no finality of happiness here, and so the Epicurean is driven on to further refinement. If pushed hard, he will take refuge in imagining a possible painlessness of the body and a possible stability of untroubled ease. Life itself, in some rare instances, may afford the substance of this comfort, and memory then will be sufficient; but if the substance eludes us, we have still that within us which by the exercise of free will can lull the mind into fancying it remembers what it never possessed. Step by step the reflective hedonist has been driven by the lessons of experience from the pursuit of positive pleasure to acquiescence in pleasure conceived as the removal of pain; from present ease in the flesh to the subtilizing power of memory in the mind, and, when memory is starved, to the voluntary imagination that life has gone well with him. The fabled ataraxy, or imperturbable calm, of the Epicurean

turns out to be something very like a pale beatitude of illusory abstraction from the tyranny of facts, the wilful mirage of a soul which imagines itself, but is not really, set apart from the material universe of chance and change.

Habeo non habeor, was the challenge of Aristippus to the world; the master of the Garden will be content with the more modest half : *Non Habeor*. There is something to startle the mind in this defensive conclusion of a philosophy which opened its attack on life under such brave and flaunting colours. There is much to cause reflection when one considers how in the end hedonism is forced into an unnatural conjunction with the other monistic philosophy with which its principles are in such violent conflict. For this ataraxy of the avowed lover of ease and pleasure can scarcely be distinguished from the apathy which the Stoic devotees of pain and labour glorified as the goal of life. This is strange. It is stranger still, remembering this negative conclusion of Epicurean and Stoic, by which good becomes a mere deprivation of evil, to cast the mind forward to the metaphysics of another and later school of monism which led the Neoplatonist to reckon evil as a mere deprivation of good. Into such paradoxical combinations and antagonisms we are driven as soon as we try to shun the simple truth that good is good and evil is evil, each in its own right and judged by its immediate effect in the soul. It may appear from the foregoing that the hedonist, in his pursuit of the *summum bonum*, argues from point to point in a straight line; in practice he seems rather to follow no single guide, but to fluctuate between two disparate yet inseparable motives.

At one time, in a world where physical sensation is the only criterion of truth, the basis of all reality, the liberty of enjoyment is the lure that draws him on; at another time, in a world of chance and change or of mechanical law which takes no great heed of our wants, it seems as if security from misadventure must be the limit of man's desire. Other philosophers, the Platonist in his vision of the world of Ideas, the Christian in his submission to the will of God, may see their way running straight before them to the one sure goal of spiritual happiness, in which liberty and security join hands. The path of the hedonist wavers from side to side, aiming now at positive pleasure and now at mere escape from pain; and this, I take it, is one of the curious reprisals of truth, that the dualist should have in view a single end, whereas the monist should be distracted by a double purpose. Whether one or the other of the revolving objects shall stand out clearer before the hedonist's gaze, will depend perhaps chiefly upon his temperament. With an Aristippus the pleasure of the moment is supreme, though he too will have his eye open for the need of safety; with an Epicurus, more timid by nature and more reflective, the thought of security at the last will almost, if never quite, obliterate the enticement of pleasure. It was still as a good Epicurean that Horace could write:

Speme voluptates, nocet empta dolore voluptas.

[Note 1: *Non Posse Suaviter Vivi Secundum Epicurum*, I draw freely on the racy language of the old English translation.]

[Note 2: This association of pleasure and pain was familiar to Plato, He refers to it in *Phaedo* 60b, and deals with it at greater length in the [Philebus](#).]

[Note 3: Sayings 3 and 18. In my quotations I sometimes adopt the language of the excellent versions in R. D. Hicks's *Stoic and Epicurean*.]

[Note 4: Cowley, *Upon His Majesty's Bestoration*.]

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Post by “Rolf” of August 26, 2025 at 12:59 PM

Every time I think about this issue for more than a couple minutes, my brain starts to get jumbled again. It's something about the logical consistency that confuses me, I think. Here's another way of putting it:

1) There is only pleasure and pain.

2) Upon reaching the complete absence of pain, there is no room for more pleasure, only variation.

3) Let's say my hunger and thirst are satiated, my body is healthy, I have good friends, and I fear neither gods nor death.

4) This being the case, I am experiencing the absence of pain/fullness of pleasure, am I not? The jar is full. Yet this could be called a “subsistence minimum”. I am not dancing, playing, watching movies, playing board games, eating fancy foods from time to time. Yet I am not experiencing pain as the lack of these things causes no pain.

5) What, then, is the response to Plutarch's argument that animals do not simply rest once these conditions have been met, but play and fly around? You say that some pleasures are more desirable than others, but if my jar is already full (by virtue of containing no pain), then how can other pleasures make it “more full”?

Do you agree that the conditions listed in point 3 are all that is necessary to experience the absence of pain? If so, and if that is the limit of pleasure, why do you also press that these things are not enough, and that Epicurus also encourages these “active pleasures” like playing

and dancing?

If some pleasures are more pleasurable than others, wouldn't that make my jar "more full"? How does this fit together with absence of pain being the limit of pleasure? And if the jar can be full while containing different levels of pleasure, then what is it even measuring?

Does watching a fun movie do anything to "fill my jar"? I experience no pain from not watching the movie; my jar is no emptier without it. So watching it isn't removing any pain. And yet the limit of *all* pleasure is the absence of pain, not just the limit of subsistence pleasures.

I'm playing devil's advocate a little here in order to understand the logic. Again, I agree with the conclusions. But I'm having trouble seeing how it all fits together. It feels almost a little contradictory.

[Cassius](#)

Post by "Rolf" of August 26, 2025 at 1:05 PM

A quote from Menoeceus related to my confusion:

Quote

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.

Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2025 at 2:43 PM

These are great questions! Let me go through them and give you what I think is the answer. Not everyone is going to agree with me, but I think what I am about to say is the clear implication of what Torquatus was explaining to Cicero:

I think we better start here:

[Quote from Rolf](#)

1) There is only pleasure and pain.

This is not so simple that we can stop without explanation, and failure to clarify it is a source of much problem. Yes, Epicurus says that nature gives us only pleasure and pain as feelings by which to know what to choose and what to avoid.

But you are asking a series of questions about "Pleasure" and "Pain" with capital "p's" -- You are asking about the concept of pleasure and the concept of pain. As a concept which serves as a stand-in for the "goal of life," "Pleasure" is a conceptual term which encompasses all possible experiences of pleasure, from the longest and most intense to the shortest and least intense. All pleasures are conceptually part of "Pleasure," but all pleasures are not by any means identical. The same thing goes for pain.

A large part of the problem in general discussions of Epicurus is that people are talking about "Pleasure" as the conceptual goal of life without making clear that the goal of a real person's real life is not a "concept," but a set of real experiences that cannot be described completely in the term "Pleasure" any more than a map constitutes every detail of an area of land that is being mapped.

And not separating those two contexts leads to most of your questions:

[Quote from Rolf](#)

3) Let's say my hunger and thirst are satiated, my body is healthy, I have good friends, and I fear neither gods nor death.

4) This being the case, I am experiencing the absence of pain/fullness of pleasure, am I not?

The answer to (3) is "not necessarily." We are philosophers, and you have not stated in 3 that you are not suffering any pain. Torquatus' examples, including the comparison of the host pouring wine and the guest drinking in, are stated in the context that the example includes as a premise that they are otherwise without pain. Anyone who is "without pain" is therefore definitionally and conceptually at the height of pleasure, because you are speaking in broad definitional terms. Pure pleasure - 100% pleasure - cannot be made more pleasurable by removing impurities, because "pure" means without impurity, and 100% means a mathematical limit for any given subject.

So I would say that your conclusion in (4) is not properly established by (3). you have listed a number of pleasurable conditions, but you have not by so doing confirmed that your "jar is full" and that there is not more room for more pleasure in your life.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Do you agree that the conditions listed in point 3 are all that is necessary to experience the absence of pain? If so, and if that is the limit of pleasure, why do you also press that these things are not enough, and that Epicurus also encourages these “active pleasures” like playing and dancing?

So the answer here is that I do not agree that the points listed in 3 are "all that is necessary to experience the absence of pain" in total. They *could be* if you also stated that the person was without pain, but unless someone is affirmatively stating that the person is "without pain" then you don't know.

This would apply to the Chrysippus hand challenge. We know that the hand was at the "height of pleasure" only because the hypothetical was that the hand was "in its normal condition" and not in pain. Could any particular hand get more pleasure from a warm massage rather than in its normal condition? I think the answer is clearly yes, but that doesn't mean that the point made by Torquatus is incorrect. "Pure" pleasure does not necessarily equate to "most intense," or "longest duration" or "largest part of the body affected." Torquatus did not say that the hand was experiencing any of those -- not the most intense please, nor the longest, or the most extensive. The debate about the hand was in terms of the "height," or as in [PD03](#), the "limit of quantity." These are technical terms suitable for philosophical debate, but they don't tell you the difference between good heath and a good massage.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If some pleasures are more pleasurable than others, wouldn't that make my jar “more full”?

Per [PD09](#), pleasures differ from each other in at least the qualities of intensity, duration, and part of the body affected. Some particular pleasures ARE more intense, or last longer, or involve different parts of the body, and only an idiot would deny that. But all pleasures are unified in being feelings that we find desirable, and thus one of them is not more conceptually "pleasure" than is another.

This is Pleasure with a capital "P" - conceptual pleasure - all of which carries the same definition of a desirable feeling. The concept never changes, even though the particulars can and do change.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If some pleasures are more pleasurable than others, wouldn't that make my jar “more full”? How does this fit together with absence of pain being the limit of pleasure? And if the jar can be full while containing different levels of pleasure, then what is it even measuring?

A jar which can contain only "Pleasure" and "Pain" cannot be defined as full containing different levels of "Pleasure," for reasons that are obvious - we are defining the possibilities and there are no options outside our hypothetical. But different jars of "Pleasure" can and certainly will contain very different mixtures of difference types of pleasurable experiences.

We all know this to be true, but what you're asking is the right question. How can different jars be other than the same if they all are full of "Pleasure?" And the answer is that pleasures are not "just" concepts. Pleasurable experiences are what is real, while "Pleasure" is a concept that philosophers use in debate. The same goes for "Happiness." The wise man can be "Happy" even while tortured on the rack or in the throes of dying from kidney disease, because "happiness" is a concept we can define as an overall assessment of more reason for joy than for vexation, while "a feeling of happiness" is not what is generated by torture machines or kidney stones.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I'm playing devil's advocate a little here in order to understand the logic. Again, I agree with the conclusions. But I'm having trouble seeing how it all fits together. It feels almost a little contradictory.

Everyone ought to be asking these questions, because unless you demand consistency and clear answers, no one ever gets anywhere. And far too many people outside this forum are ignoring these issues and thinking that they can wink and smile and fool others - and themselves - into thinking that Buddhist nothingness / Stoic apathy really is super pleasurable.

And that's in my view why Epicurean philosophy has been stuck in the mud ever since the last of the ancient Epicureans passed away.

No one except a confirmed Buddhist or Stoic or Sadist really believes that "absence of pain" understood as 99% of the world understands it is really worth being a goal in life. But the majority of Epicureans have fled from the idea that "absence of pain" really means "pleasure" because that would not be respectable, or virtuous, and to say so would earn them the disapproving frowns of the intelligentsia.

In my view, you can either demand consistency and clarity, in which case you come around to seeing that these are definitional and philosophical issues. Once you accept that, "absence of pain" becomes nothing more than technical terminology for exactly the same thing expressed by the word "pleasure."

The reason you've chosen technical terminology like that is because you are philosopher, and you're dealing with technical objections from the Platonists and others who demand to know "the limit" of pleasure. Absence of pain is highly useful for answering that question - for identifying the theoretical limit.

But "absence of pain" in this context is conceptual, and this conceptual answer does not tell you whether to stop when you're not thirsty or hungry. You have to apply also the rest of the conceptual framework, in which you're previously identified that all pleasure is desirable, and that there would never be any reason whatsoever ---but one -- not to seek to obtain all the pleasure you can. And that single reason not to pursue a particular pleasure is that you evaluate that pursuing that pleasure would result - in the end - with bringing you more pain than pleasure.

I suppose I should address too the related question of how long you wish to live, or how much pleasure you wish to experience while you are alive. To me, the answer Epicurus points to is that "satisfaction" comes from realizing the limit that you are human and mortal and that nature allows you to live and pursue pleasure for only a certain period of time in good health. You don't need to be king or the most famous person in the world to consider your jar of life to be full of pleasure. But if you have consciously avoided, through fear or otherwise, stepping up to experience the pleasures that are possible to you, then the reasonable and thoughtful person is going to naturally feel regret at passing over pleasure for no good reason. And "regret" is a pain.

Edit: As always, I'm not Epicurus and can't speak for him. These answers are just the best I can do today given my state of analysis and reading from all the various materials.

Post by “Bryan” of August 26, 2025 at 4:30 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I experience no pain from not watching the movie

Of course boredom is a pain. Once your body is well-served, we are not expected to just stare at a wall for the rest of the day!

If a movie is your focus, just make sure it is enjoyable in the short and long term.

"Again, in the work *On Fulfillment*, [Epicurus] speaks in such a way 'for I myself am not able to conceive the good - removing the pleasures from flavor, or removing those from Aphrodisian activities, or removing those from auditory experiences, or removing those pleasurable movements from form in accordance with appearance'" (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 7.11, 280A)

From that basis, Epicurus (as we would expect) recommended mostly studying philosophy and physics in one's free time.

"...I recommending continuous activity in natural science and pacify myself particularly with such a life..." 10.37a

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 27, 2025 at 1:43 PM

Another way to investigate all of this is to plug it into real life experiences.

It is all about personal subjective experiences, and determining how far you want to go with it (how deep you want to go into investigating your internal mental experiences and physical sensations).

For the sensation of taste, we have a limit which the stomach provides. We must honor the full stomach and not eat when pain arises. This is the natural limit of pleasure regarding taste. You can practice bringing the concept of "the limit of pleasure" into practical application by eating pizza! 😊 (Why ruin a good meal by eating so much that you feel pain for the next half hour or hour afterward.)

Lately I've been chewing sugar-free gum (cinnamon and also tropical fruit flavor). But I've decided that I will no longer buy anymore or chew it, because I find it brings up mental annoyance for me - because I don't feel a sense of completion and as soon as the flavor is gone I want to start over with new gum, or I feel a craving to eat something (but I need to watch my calorie intake these days due to a slower metabolism (not getting as much exercise these days).

As for the sensations of vision: beautiful shape/color ...this too can have a limit. I have discovered this limit when looking online at Pinterest AI images (too much becomes painful! 😞)

Post by “Rolf” of August 28, 2025 at 11:20 AM

Would you say then [Cassius](#) that “the absence of pain being the limit of pleasure” is not something I have to hold in my everyday mind as something practical? It’s more just something

for use in philosophical reasoning and debate?

Post by “Cassius” of August 28, 2025 at 12:40 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Would you say then Cassius that “the absence of pain being the limit of pleasure” is not something I have to hold in my everyday mind as something practical? It’s more just something for use in philosophical reasoning and debate

I think that having a mental image of the most desirable state is highly practical and even essential and is similar to projecting this as a "godlike life." For that reason I would say that it needs to be held in mind In the same way Epicurus tells Herodotus to keep an outline in mind and to be able to flip back and forth from high level to detail at a moments notice.

And I would also say that the expansive definition of pleasure to include appreciation of all nonpainful life, particularly mental appreciation of the benefits of a true philosophy, is also a daily or even hourly thing.

This isn't just for times of debate.

Post by “Rolf” of August 28, 2025 at 12:47 PM

Hmm, okay. I think what I’m struggling with is that to me, absence of pain sounds like a state in which I’m perfectly content and don’t feel like I need anything more. At the same time, my practical evaluation of Epicurean ethics is that of prudence and hedonic calculus. In my head, these two ideas don’t quite seem to align. It doesn’t feel so clear.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But you are asking a series of questions about "Pleasure" and "Pain" with capital "p's" -- You are asking about the concept of pleasure and the concept of pain. As a concept which serves as a stand-in for the "goal of life," "Pleasure" is a conceptual term which encompasses all possible experiences of pleasure, from the longest and most intense to the shortest and least intense. All pleasures are conceptually part of "Pleasure," but

all pleasures are not by any means identical. The same thing goes for pain.

This idea with the concept of Pleasure and Pain vs actual experiences of pleasures and pain feels like it is putting me on the path to understanding. Could you specify in my previous questions where I am talking about the concepts and where I am talking about the actual experiences? This would be helpful in clarifying for me.

Post by “Rolf” of August 28, 2025 at 12:50 PM

I also find practical analogies and examples very helpful. Would you be able to give such an example for absence of pain, the concepts of pleasure and pain, and the jar?

Post by “Cassius” of August 28, 2025 at 1:28 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I think what I’m struggling with is that to me, absence of pain sounds like a state in which I’m perfectly content and don’t feel like I need anything more. At the same time, my practical evaluation of Epicurean ethics is that of prudence and hedonic calculus. In my head, these two ideas don’t quite seem to align. It doesn’t feel so clear.

And I think it sounds that way to most people, and that's why Cicero and Plutarch use it like a sledgehammer against Epicurus, because understanding it as "being satisfied with the bare minimum of life" is deadly and no healthy person in their right mind is going to accept that. (Of course there are many people who are not healthy or in their right mind who *do* accept that version, and that just makes the problem worse.)

All of these issues are very much a test like "the size of the sun is as it appears to be." If you are satisfied then of course you don't want any more -- that's the definition of being satisfied. The real question is knowing the difference between "when" you should be satisfied, and when you shouldn't.

All of us have this baggage from being raised Christian (or religious in some way) with a mixture of Buddhism and Stoicism thrown in to emphasize that wanting pleasure or anything

more than you currently have is a character flaw. That's as much the problem as anything else. If you were born on a desert island with nothing but nature teaching you through observation of how all other life lives, you'd never have a moment for thinking that you shouldn't sing, dance, fly, embrace, etc, just like all the other animals do when they satisfy their thirst and hunger.

But Epicurean philosophy can be twisted into justifying just such an outcome, and in that respect the result is worse than Stoicism or religion - at least those (or most of them) promise a life in heaven as a reward for asceticism now. The "Absence of Pain" Epicureans don't even get that -- they get asceticism for the sake of whatever it brings in this life, which is nothing.

As humans we live through using our minds properly, and Epicurus is pointing the way to proper thinking. Plato et al are wrong to say that life is neutral or suffering with a few intervals of pleasure. The right attitude is that life is enjoyable and needs to be enjoyed, and so we set our minds to enjoying every aspect of it that can possibly be enjoyed in mind and body, and that can include anything and everything that isn't explicitly painful.

I'd say the most helpful way of looking at things is to focus on how short life is, and how when it's over it's over. If you really focus on what that means, what kind of a human being are you if you don't want to use your time the very best way possible? If "pleasure" is everything that is desirable and "pain" is what is undesirable, then the right philosophic attitude is to pursue as much "pleasure" as possible.

All of these words have specific meanings that can be extremely helpful, or if misunderstood, extremely harmful. But this is the importance of philosophy. No one said this was easy - if it was easy there'd be hundreds of Epicuruses instead of essentially only one.

Looking back over your questions I'll go back to the best example I know of. You only have some much time in life to experience what you're going to experience. It is helpful to visualize your total lifetime as a jar, which you must decide how to use. The jar by definitional choice can contain only (1) pleasure or (2) pain. No part of it is ever empty. The pains and pleasures it can contain are all possible mental and bodily pleasures.

It's up to you to decide whether to act to control what will be in that jar. If you identify pleasure widely and understand that it's not just mental and physical stimulation but all kinds of mental and physical health, then it becomes possible for most everyone to see that it is a practical goal to work toward filling that jar with pleasures. If you DON'T view pleasure that way, then it will seem like and be a fruitless task to fill the jar with pleasure, and you'll never find a way to do it no matter how hard you chase stimulation.

That's the paradigm everyone is faced with, but they don't have to accept it. They can choose to drift through life and take no concern for what is in their jar, and as a result they will never be satisfied and their time will be spent on things that end up being more painful than pleasurable.

So in general I'd say that this is the big picture. Once you've got the big picture it's up to you to apply it - simply reading it or acknowledging that it exists doesn't accomplish anything. Time is always ticking, and the time that passes without working to maximize pleasure never comes back.

To me this isn't dark or discouraging, it's highly motivational, and it doesn't encourage me to spend all my time looking back and "feeling satisfied," it leads to a proper balance of appreciating past, present, and future, and acting appropriately toward them all.

Post by “Rolf” of August 28, 2025 at 3:09 PM

Excellent reply Cassius.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Looking back over your questions I'll go back to the best example I know of. You only have some much time in life to experience what you're going to experience. It is helpful to visualize your total lifetime as a jar, which you must decide how to use. The jar by definitional choice can contain only (1) pleasure or (2) pain. No part of it is ever empty. The pains and pleasures it can contain are all possible mental and bodily pleasures.

This is particular I find very helpful. I'd say I'm quite a “tactile” person who prefers these more tangible and illustrative examples over abstract concepts.

To be sure I'm understanding correctly: The (conceptual) goal then is to have our jar as full of pleasures as possible, as often possible. “Absence of pain” (meaning pleasure, as the feelings are only two) is the limit of pleasure. I'm imagining someone laying down on a sun lounger, hands behind their head, saying “it doesn't get better than this”. Absence of pain, as a conceptual term, isn't necessarily referring to a literal absence of hunger, thirst, and backaches, but is more expansive than that. Just as pleasure includes all kinds of things, so does pain: Boredom, worry, stress, fear, doubt, guilt. And this is why simply absence of thirst/hunger etc. isn't enough to definitively say someone has reached the limit of pleasure. Am I on the right track? Please point out anything you disagree with.

As for Chrysippus' hand: How can it be said that the hand had reached the limit of pleasure if a hand massage would've been even more intensely pleasurable than the healthy resting state?

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Could you specify in my previous questions where I am talking about the concepts and where I am talking about the actual experiences? This would be helpful in clarifying for me.

If you could take a look at this when you get a spare moment, it would be a big help! Thank you for all your support with this Cassius, I very much appreciate it. I likely would've dropped most philosophies I've explored by this point, but with Epicurean philosophy my gut is telling me this is just a matter of misunderstanding terminology.

Post by “Rolf” of August 28, 2025 at 3:26 PM

Hmm, how's this for an analogy on the issue of “jars both being full but containing different amounts (intensities) of pleasure?:

One jar full of water, the other full of chocolate milk. Both jars are full of pleasure: Water is great, it quenches your thirst! But chocolate milk is sure a lot tastier. 😊

Post by “Rolf” of August 28, 2025 at 3:34 PM

Another question: Would you say that absence of pain as the limit of pleasure is more of a theoretical goal? In the same way that the gods can be seen as mental ideal? Or is it something we're expected to achieve on a day to day basis?

Post by “Cassius” of August 28, 2025 at 6:46 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I'm imagining someone laying down on a sun lounger, hands behind their head, saying “it doesn't get better than this”.

I think that is *one* possible interpretation, certainly. But I'd push back on this example simply because it seems to be the default example that everyone jumps to suggest -- that the best experience in life is "taking it easy" and I don't think that is a healthy attitude. Aren't you in your 20's? At that age you have your whole life ahead of you, and would normally be making plans for what you want to "do" with your life, rather than the way you will "relax" during those times you are resting. I'm not trying to be too specific but I presume you know what I mean. "Resting" at the end of a journey is certainly a good thing, but so is the journey itself. Epicurean circles which perpetuate the notion that "rest" is the goal of life are playing right into the hands of Cicero and Plutarch and anyone else who for reasons of their own want to pigeonhole Epicureans into a "wallflower" category.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

And this is why simply absence of thirst/hunger etc. isn't enough to definitively say someone has reached the limit of pleasure. Am I on the right track?

That's the way I see it. Just like in Plutarch's examples it make no sense to eat or drink a little just to the point of getting rid of thirst and hunger, and then sit comatose until the desires for food and drink come back again. An Epicurean wouldn't live to eat (or drink) any more than to pursue any other "virtue" - the purpose of eating and drinking is to keep your body healthy so that you can then do more with it. Unless, that is, a particular person wants to admit, "Yes, I think the life of a cow would be lovely, and I'd be more than happy to graze in the fields all day staring at the ground."

Again, I am not knocking the pleasures of eating and drinking. I am knocking the idea that Epicurus held that these are more important to life than the other pleasures that we pursue after we eat and drink our fill. These "other pleasures" of mind and body are the real battleground in the argument.

Yes you "can" compete with gods for at last a time with only bread and water. But is that really the way you want to confine yourself to doing it?

[Quote from Rolf](#)

As for Chrysippus' hand: How can it be said that the hand had reached the limit of pleasure if a hand massage would've been even more intensely pleasurable than the healthy resting state?

The answer is the contrast between "limit" and "intensity." Those are not the same thing. We're defining the limit of pleasure as 100% pleasure - pure pleasure - the state of experience when there is no pain mixed in. That observation tells you nothing about the duration, intensity, or parts of the body affected by the particular pleasures you are engaged in, and those are very different. Your question about the jar full of water and the jar full of chocolate milk is right on

point. Both are pleasurable, but on occasion one of them can be much more pleasurable than the other. PDO3 refers to the limit of "quantity" of pleasure, not the limit of intensity, or duration, or part of the body affected. if you stretch the analogy beyond the point it was intended to make you cease making a valid point and start making a terrible one. All pleasures are pleasure, but all pleasures are not equally pleasurable. The very idea of stating a specific set of pleasures that should be the goal of every human being is an upside-down and perverse way of looking at the question, but that's exactly the way monotheists want to proceed in everything. They want to think that there is a central power, a divine god, that sets out "one way" that everyone should follow. And that's just hogwash. Nature and the feeling of pleasure are not so restrictive as to conform to and comply with Abrahamic theology.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If you could take a look at this when you get a spare moment, it would be a big help!

The reason I haven't responded to that already is I am not sure how to pick out pieces of what you're written. If you'd like to ask specifics I could more easily address them. For the moment I'd say that any time there is an implication that one pleasure is absolutely "better" than another for everyone, you've got an abstraction that is going to bite you just like "virtue" bites the Stoics.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

One jar full of water, the other full of chocolate milk. Both jars are full of pleasure: Water is great, it quenches your thirst! But chocolate milk is sure a lot tastier

Yes, as above, I think that's an example that helps flesh out where the jar analogy stops being useful and starts being harmful, if and when it is presumed that everyone has the same jar and wants to fill it in the same way. That's just not correct and not a part of the philosophic issue.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Another question: Would you say that absence of pain as the limit of pleasure is more of a theoretical goal? In the same way that the gods can be seen as mental ideal? Or is it something we're expected to achieve on a day to day basis?

It is a theoretical goal but that is not to say it is a useless abstraction, as we've been discussing. A starting point here is that everyone wants the "best" life. But what is the meaning of "best?" Think about it for very long and if you're not a monotheist you'll realize there is no single best for everyone. But even then the question remains, what can you say about "best" other than that there is nothing better than best? Yes it's wordplay, but it's a logical question. There's can't be anything better than best. And if you're going to suggest that "pleasure" is the best life, then you've got to have an answer to the question of "what's the best life of pleasure? " And the

answer to that question is that the best life of pleasure is one that is completely full of pleasure with no portion of that life being pain. I don't think we'd be discussing "absence of pain" at all were it not for this question and the need to construct a logical answer to it. And this is not speculation, it's spelled out by Plato in [Philebus](#) and in other places by other people, including clear statements to this effect by Seneca, and the references we've been discussing that Cicero has preserved through Torquatus that make no sense in any other way.

Post by “Cassius” of August 28, 2025 at 7:20 PM

Quote

I'm imagining someone laying down on a sun lounger, hands behind their head, saying "it doesn't get better than this".

To push back even harder on this point: All experiences of pleasure are real experiences of pleasure, but every time we say "for example" and imply that our example will impress another person as being a "highest good," we risk giving the impression that the person listening should immediately agree that this experience would be FOR THEM TOO the same kind of "absence of pain." No individual tree constitutes the forest, and singling out one example is always going to risk confusing the two levels that are being discussed. Forests exist. Trees exist. But the two are not the same, and a single maple tree is no more indicative of a forest than is a single pine or a single oak.

Many of us are so fed up with worthless abstractions that we think all abstractions are worthless, but that's not the case, and abstractions such as are involved in visualizing the best life are essential. We can't hope to reach a target without visualizing the target, but everyone's target is going to look different.

The "Dude's" lifestyle is no more or less necessarily indicative of the Epicurean concept of a best life than would be that of Julius Caesar. The concept of the best life is broad enough to include these two extremes and any number in between. Trying to tie down the best life into a single example isn't possible, and the idea that it might be possible can be very damaging, because trying to do so ignores the Epicurean viewpoint about the nature of the universe and the absence of absolute forms.

The Epicurean texts don't describe "the best life" in any but very general mental and bodily terms, culminating in the description of 100% pleasure 0% pain, which we ought to recognize is the best terminology that by definition can be achieved.

Post by “Don” of August 28, 2025 at 8:08 PM

My vision of the jar is oil and water. They don't mix.

But we could add different colors of water, signifying different pleasures.

I'm just blue skying it.

Post by “Cassius” of August 28, 2025 at 8:10 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

My vision of the jar is oil and water. They don't mix.

Yes I agree that's a key part of it.

Post by “Eikadistes” of August 28, 2025 at 8:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The Epicurean texts don't describe "the best life" in any but very general mental and bodily terms, culminating in the description of 100% pleasure 0% pain, which we ought to recognize is the best terminology that by definition can be achieved.

Indeed! I read this earlier today by coincidence: "He (sc. Metrodorus) [writes] that, although he likes the idea that **the [best] life** is the one that is [accompanied by tranquillity], peace, and cares that cause minimal trouble, it does not seem that this goal is achieved at least in this way, namely, if we avoid all those things over which, if they were present, we would sometimes experience difficulties and distress. For in truth many things do cause some pain if they are present but disturb us more if they are absent. Thus, health does involve some care and effort for the body but causes unspeakably more distress when it is absent" (Philódēmos, [On Property Management](#), Col. 12-13)

Later (of interest) he adds, "one must not avoid all things that, if they are present, may cause all kinds of troubles, concerns, and worries. On the contrary, [one must accept] some things,

among which is in fact wealth, that are less of a burden when they are present" (*Ibid.*, Col. 13)

Post by "Cassius" of August 28, 2025 at 9:41 PM

Great finds, Eikadistes! Right on point as to why we sometimes choose pain for the sake of pleasure, and pretty directly contrary to that statement of Horace we've discussed recently.

Post by "Cassius" of August 28, 2025 at 9:47 PM

It's interesting to see even this stated so "backhandedly."

So that's Philodemus writing about Metrodorus in the context of "Property Management"..... There's got to be more to be derived from the overall context of how these issues are being balanced. Clearly the more you have the more you have to worry about, and on the other extreme if you don't have enough you're clearly going to be confronting certain types of pains as a result. Presumably they were wrestling with the right way to express these issues just like we are.

Post by "Rolf" of August 29, 2025 at 7:00 AM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

Indeed! I read this earlier today by coincidence: "He (sc. Metrodorus) [writes] that, although he likes the idea that the [best] life is the one that is [accompanied by tranquillity], peace, and cares that cause minimal trouble, it does not seem that this goal is achieved at least in this way, namely, if we avoid all those things over which, if they were present, we would sometimes experience difficulties and distress. For in truth many things do cause some pain if they are present but disturb us more if they are absent. Thus, health does involve some care and effort for the body but causes unspeakably more distress when it is absent" (Philódēmos, On Property Management, Col. 12-13)

I forget who on here said it, but this reminds me a bit of something along the lines of “the perfect/best life is for the gods”. Us mortals are always going to have to compromise like this, and while we can live like the gods for certain periods, we must expect that pains will arise.

Post by “Rolf” of August 29, 2025 at 7:03 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The "Dude's" lifestyle is no more or less necessarily indicative of the Epicurean concept of a best life than would be that of Julius Caesar.

Oh, 100%. Your comment here is important, and my imagining of that scenario probably says more about what absence of pain looks like to me than an objective path to such. I do lean a little more Dude than Caesar.

That said, sitting on a sun lounger at a resort sipping piña coladas for the rest of my days sounds absolutely awful and would certainly not leave me content. 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 29, 2025 at 8:11 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

That said, sitting on a sun lounger at a resort sipping piña coladas for the rest of my days sounds absolutely awful and would certainly not leave me content.

Letter to Menoeceus:

[132] "For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I forget who on here said it, but this reminds me a bit of something along the lines of "the perfect/best life is for the gods". Us mortals are always going to have to compromise like this, and while we can live like the gods for certain periods, we must expect that pains will arise.

From Diogenes Laertius, "wise man sayings" section:

"They say also that there are two ideas of happiness, complete happiness, such as belongs to a god, which admits of no increase, and the happiness which is concerned with the addition and subtraction of pleasures."

Post by "Don" of August 29, 2025 at 8:37 AM

Good quotes, [Kalosyni](#) .

It literally just hit me as I read the Menoikeus quote that:

[Quote from Letter to Menoecus](#)

[132] "For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which **produce** a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."

A pleasant life is produced by sober reasoning etc. Epicurus doesn't tell Menoikeus that the sum total of a pleasant life is sober reasoning etc but that such a life is produced by those things.

From my own commentary on that section:

Rearranging the Greek into a more "English order":

οὐδ' ὅσα πολυτελῆς τράπεζα ἰχθύων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀλλὰ νήφων λογισμὸς φέρει τὸν ἡδὺν γεννᾶ βίον

"and nor does an extravagant table of fish and other things **bring forth** a sweet life but self-controlled reasoning [does bring forth a sweet life]."

Post by "Cassius" of August 29, 2025 at 9:04 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

my imagining of that scenario probably says more about what absence of pain looks like to me than an objective path to such. I do lean a little more Dude than Caesar

I do lean a little more Dude than Caesar 😊

It seems like perspectives on the best life are like a pendulum, swinging from one extreme to the other, at least in terms of mass popularity. But both ends of the swing have their place, and the pendulum doesn't stay in balance and keep swinging without both.

Probably could create a "sorites" question about a pendulum by stopping it with your hand and asking "At what point on it's path is the string and the weight acting as a pendulum?" You can isolate points all day long but no single point on the path of the pendulum captures what it means to be a pendulum.

Post by "Cassius" of August 29, 2025 at 9:32 AM

You know something else i would add to this argument harks back to what Plutarch cited. In arguing that the animals do not stop activity after they are no longer hungry or thirsty, but proceed to play and fly and swim and engage in other activities solely for enjoyment, Plutarch reminds us of Epicurus' core argument. Epicurus takes as the gold standard what the young of all species do before they are corrupted. And while there are many statements about absence of pain that are regularly twisted to imply that we are different, and we as humans should go comatose after we reach a subsistence level of "absence of pain," I am not aware of many surviving statements for the reverse position. The major one I can recall is that of Torquatus in On Ends where "Looking to the young of all species" is specifically stated to be Epicurus' proof that pleasure is by Nature desirable.

Given that we can all see that the young of all species engage in play, and that Epicurus would have seen the same thing, yet Epicurus never said that he would reject "play" from life, this seems to me a strong argument against the Plutarch "absence of pain is a stated of anesthesia" position. If Epicurus had meant for us to reject the "play" of young animals, he would have said so specifically and not used their conduct as the basis of his philosophy.

Is anyone aware of other less familiar citations that we can use to bolster this argument (the young of all species pursue active pleasures and therefore so should we) beyond Torquatus?

Quote

Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations.

[30] Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion.

Post by "Patrikios" of September 6, 2025 at 3:27 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Would you say then Cassius that "the absence of pain being the limit of pleasure" is not something I have to hold in my everyday mind as something practical? It's more just something for use in philosophical reasoning and debate

I think that **having a mental image of the most desirable state is highly practical** and even essential and is similar to projecting this as a "godlike life." For that reason I would say that it needs to be held in mind In the same way Epicurus tells Herodotus to keep an outline in mind and to be able to flip back and forth from high level to detail at a moments notice.

And I would also say that the expansive definition of pleasure to include appreciation of all nonpainful life, particularly **mental appreciation of the benefits of a true philosophy, is also a daily or even hourly thing.**

This isn't just for times of debate.

[Rolf](#) thanks for your series of questions to better understand the pleasure/pain concept, and how to apply it.

As you were asking for practical examples, here is how I have been trying to apply this concept on a daily/hourly basis, as [Cassius](#) suggested above.

We know that even if we have no physical pains or ongoing mental disturbances, every day life is going to present us with perturbations.

I try to start my day with the “**mental appreciation**” of the Epicurean framework.

As I review my schedule and any interactions I will have, I try to mentally preview those interactions, as an Epicurean wise man might conduct himself. That helps me set an open-minded view towards those upcoming meetings or planned calls.

Another example to apply these concepts is when I take my daily walk near downtown, with lots of construction these days. Instead of being upset about all the sidewalks along my normal walking routes being closed, I set a mental attitude of **choosing** the most pleasant street and shady sidewalk, while trying to **avoid** areas with construction workers. So, holding the Epicurean concept in your mind as you go about an active day can lead to a day with more pleasant than painful experiences.

Do examples as this help you, [Rolf](#) ?

Post by “Rolf” of September 23, 2025 at 5:13 AM

Hey folks! I’ve been pondering this again and it seems as if “absence of pain” as a concept denoting the limit of pleasure is primarily intended as proof that a life of *consistent pleasure* is possible and attainable. If pleasure had no limit, then we’d constantly be trying to fill our bottomless cup. But with the limit of the quantity of pleasure at the removal of pain, we can set up our lives so that we fairly consistently have a fullness of pleasure. Of course, this doesn’t mean in itself that our lives will be the most intensely pleasurable - not all pleasures are equal in this sense - but we *can* experience ongoing pleasure.

As I’m writing this it doesn’t seem as clear to me as it did in my head... This seemingly simple topic makes me head spin!

Post by “Cassius” of September 23, 2025 at 6:50 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4673-episode-295-plutarch-s-absurd-interpretation-of-epicurean-absence-of-pain/>

[Quote from Rolf](#)

it seems as if "absence of pain" as a concept denoting the limit of pleasure is primarily intended as proof that a life of consistent pleasure is possible and attainable. If pleasure had no limit, then we'd constantly be trying to fill our bottomless cup.

Since that is the analogy that is explicitly stated at the opening of Lucretius Book 6, I think you are on firm ground:

[Quote from Lucretius Book 6 - Bailey](#)

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.

also:

[Quote from Rolf](#)

As I'm writing this it doesn't seem as clear to me as it did in my head... This seemingly simple topic makes me head spin!

What you wrote is very clear and makes complete sense. When you see that the vessel has a limit then you see that it can be filled. The problem comes in trying to stretch the analogy too far. Analogizing an Epicurean-inspired life to a well-formed jar solves the false allegation that a life of pleasure can never be complete, but it does not answer the question of what kind of pleasure you should use to fill your jar.

If any pleasure would do, what about the pleasure of thinking that god directs your life so that everything works together for good if you love the lord, or the pleasure of thinking that you will be lifted to heaven when you die? It is undeniable that those thoughts can be pleasurable too -- are you going to fill your jar with those kinds of pleasures?

The answer is "no," and while the vessel analogy can still be used to an extent (maybe you can say that those pleasures evaporate so the jar doesn't stay full) the vessel analogy can't fulfill every need for explanation of the issues.

This wouldn't be a problem except for those who want to suggest that "absence of pain" is a specific pleasure in itself. It is impossible to name such a pleasure, because all pleasures and pains are discrete experiences, and "absence of anything" doesn't describe a specific experience. Absence of a heap of sand doesn't tell you anything about what IS at the location

you are discussing. Absence of pain tells you that pleasure is there, but ONLY because you have previously identified that whenever pain is absent, what is in that location is some form of pleasure. But you aren't stating what kind of pleasure is present without going into further detail, and if anyone wants to suggest that all pleasures are exactly the same then they are speaking nonsense. That's just like Epicurus describes (in the letter to Menoecus) the man who says that it is better to never be born, or rush to death. Such a man is talking lies or nonsense, because he could easily end his life if that is what he really thought.