

Horace - Buying Pleasure With Pain is Harmful (????)

Post by "Cassius" of August 22, 2025 at 9:53 AM

The P.E. More book "Hellenistic Philosophies" concludes a section on Epicurus with this quote:

"Speme voluptates, nocet empta dolore voluptas" which is suggested to be translated as "Hope for pleasures, but pleasure bought with pain is harmful."

I'm looking for the original without much success so far - I cannot confirm this search result below, but it should be relatively easy to trace this further.

If the suggested translation is correct, then I have to think that this may be an indication of Horace's fall from Epicurean grace, so to speak, because this would in my view contradict the explicit words of Epicurus in the letter to Menoeceus, and contradict the way Torquatus explains the issue in "On Ends."

The issue would be that a flat condemnation of every undergoing any pain for the sake of a greater pleasure, would indeed bolster the ultra-minimalist argument that we should never seek any pleasure that costs any amount of pain, a view to which I think most all of us here on the forum would object.

Hopefully when we trace the origin of this back there will be additional context to explain this. Further, a simple tweaking of the verb from "is" to "can be" or "sometimes is" would solve the problem. But a flat prohibition against every undergoing any pain for the sake of pleasure would in my mind be irreconcilable with correct Epicurean doctrine. If there is no way to redeem this quote, it may prove to be an excellent citation to establish that Horace cannot be relied on for correct Epicurean interpretations. And such a viewpoint would also help explain why Horace was indeed reputed to have let go of his Epicurean views later in life - he didn't understand or apply them properly.

Here's the first search results:

The Latin phrase "Speme voluptates, nocet empta dolore voluptas" can be translated into English as "Hope for pleasures, but pleasure bought with pain is harmful." A reliable source for this translation is the work of Horace, a Roman poet, as this phrase is derived from his writings, specifically from his "Epistles" (Book I, Epistle II, line 55). The Latin text and its English translation can be found in reputable classical literature databases or translations of Horace's works. For a reliable source, you can refer to:

- Perseus Digital Library (Tufts University): This provides access to Horace's original Latin texts and translations. The specific line can be found in Horace's Epistles (Book I, Epistle

II).

Link: [Perseus Digital Library - Horace's Epistles](#)

This source includes the original Latin text and reliable English translations, ensuring accuracy for your query.

Post by “Don” of August 22, 2025 at 10:15 AM

Are you trusting an AI summary in your search?? 🤔 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Here's the first search results:

Ya gotta assess the individual search result links.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

this phrase is derived from his writings, specifically from his "Epistles" (Book I, Epistle II, line 55).

The line is from the Letters, but that Perseus link doesn't go to Horace's Letters.

Okay, now we're getting somewhere:

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Here's the context:

Quote

Money is sought, and a wife fruitful in bearing children, and wild woodlands are reclaimed by the plow. [To what end all this?] He, that has got a competency, let him wish for no more. Not a house and farm, nor a heap of brass and gold, can remove fevers from the body of their sick master, or cares from his mind. The possessor must be well, if he thinks of enjoying the things which he has accumulated. To him that is a slave to desire or to fear, house and estate do just as much good as paintings to a sore-eyed person, fomentations to the gout, music to ears afflicted with collected matter. Unless the vessel be sweet, whatever you pour into it turns sour. **Despise pleasures, pleasure bought with pain is hurtful.** The covetous man is ever in want; set a

certain limit to your wishes. The envious person wastes at the thriving condition of another: Sicilian tyrants never invented a greater torment than envy. He who will not curb his passion, will wish that undone which his grief and resentment suggested, while he violently plies his revenge with unsated rancor. Rage is a short madness. Rule your passion, which commands, if it do not obey; do you restrain it with a bridle, and with fetters. The groom forms the docile horse, while his neck is yet tender, to go the way which his rider directs him: the young hound, from the time that he barked at the deer's skin in the hall, campaigns it in the woods. Now, while you are young, with an untainted mind imbibe instruction: now apply yourself to the best [masters of morality]. A cask will long preserve the flavor, with which when new it was once impregnated. But if you lag behind, or vigorously push on before, I neither wait for the loiterer, nor strive to overtake those that precede me.

Here's the Latin from Wikisource: [https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/Epistulae...ius\)/Liber_I/II](https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/Epistulae...ius)/Liber_I/II)

Oh, and it's *Sperne* voluptates; nocet empta dolore voluptas, and not *speme*?

Post by “Cassius” of August 22, 2025 at 10:41 AM

Thanks Don! Lots of clearly correct material in there. But this crucial line in narrower context still seems objectionable to me, so I'll try to dig further into whether the Latin justifies it. If the Latin does, I would still fault Horace for this formulation, which is perhaps worse even than the first suggested translation:

Unless the vessel be sweet, whatever you pour into it turns sour. ***Despise pleasures, pleasure bought with pain is hurtful.*** The covetous man is ever in want; set a certain limit to your wishes.

Post by “Don” of August 22, 2025 at 11:00 AM

Maybe some temporal context might help?

This line from the letter in question (1.2.55) was written (per Wikipedia for now) :

Quote

Epistularum liber primus (First Book of Letters) is the seventh work by Horace, published in the year 20 BC. This book consists of 20 Epistles.

Horace's famous "Epicuri de grege porcum" appears in an epistle to Albius Tibullus (1.4.12-16) written around the same time (apparently) as the letter in question, in fact it's only two letters later in Book 1.

I don't have time right now, but it might be instructive to read the first few letters in Book 1:

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to see what Epicurean themes - if any - jump out and whether Horace is providing his own take on the philosophy (whether or not he's a pig in the herd) or not.

Post by “Cassius” of August 22, 2025 at 11:21 AM

Thanks again Don, those are very helpful leads and we can pursue this into the future as time allows.

Yes it seems to be commonly noted that Horace was more Epicurean when younger than older, but I've never seen much explanation behind those general comments.

Below is more of the Latin from your wikisource link. So there's clearly a first imperative clause that reads *spurn pleasures* / "Sperne voluptates.... followed by a new thought.

I would think that the best hope for a saving construction would be that the clause/phrase after that is intended to restrict the meaning to "spurn those pleasures that cause more pleasure than pain." My Latin is not good enough to be confident of any construction, but it sure doesn't look at first glance like his choice of words goes in that direction. In fact at this point it's hard to imagine much of a different construction - everything adds up to something like "Spurn pleasures; pleasures acquired by pain are harmful." And I see that as entirely contrary to the heart of what Epicurus was saying. Life constantly presents options where choices have to be made whether to engage in activities that are painful in order to acquire pleasures that are more worthwhile.

It's possible that as a mirror to the redefined meaning of "pleasure" there was also a redefinition of "pain" so that all sorts of effort that we would consider struggle and involving pain might fall outside the Epicurean definition of pain. However I don't see the texts going in that direction - does anyone? Given the expansive definition of pleasure we should probably be

open to concluding that Epicurus had a narrow reading of "pain," but if so I'm not sure the texts we have really indicate that interpretation. I know there's reference to not needing to pursue desires involving "struggle" so maybe the possibility exists that the argument was being made, by Horace or others, to the effect that *painful exertion which causes greater pleasure in the end should not be considered pain at all*. But at the moment I don't see that as likely.

If so that's definitely something for us to pursue and clarify, but it seems more likely that this is more attributable to Horace being depressed post-Philippi.

Nodictionaries has the component words as:

Sperne uoluptates; nocet empta dolore uoluptas.

sperno, spernere, spreui, spretusscorn, despise, spurn

voluptas, voluptatis F pleasure, delight, enjoyment

noceo, nocere, nocui, nocitusharm, hurt; injure

emo, emere, emi, emptusbuy; gain, acquire, obtain

dolor, doloris M pain, anguish, grief, sorrow, suffering; resentment, indignation

voluptas, voluptatis F pleasure, delight, enjoyment

More of the Latin:

Quote

Non domus et fundus, non aeris aceruus et auri
aegroto domini deduxit corpore febris,
non animo curas; ualeat possessor oportet,
si comportatis rebus bene cogitat uti. [50](#)

Qui cupit aut metuit, iuuat illum sic domus et res
ut lippum pictae tabulae, fomenta podagram,
auriculas citharae collecta sorde dolentis.

Sincerum est nisi uas, quodcumque infundis acescit.

Sperne uoluptates; nocet empta dolore uoluptas. [55](#)

Semper auarus eget; certum uoto pete finem.

Inuidus alterius macrescit rebus opimis;
inuidia Siculi non inuenere tyranni
maius tormentum. Qui non moderabitur irae,
infectum uolet esse, dolor quod suaserit et mens, [60](#)
dum poenas odio per uim festinat inulto.

Ira furor breuis est; animum rege, qui nisi paret,
imperat, hunc frenis, hunc tu compesce catena.

Display More

Post by “Cassius” of August 22, 2025 at 12:04 PM

One way to frame the question (and rehabilitate Horace's statement) might be:

It's clear that Epicurus held the term "pleasure" to include many *more* experiences in life than what most people include when they think of pleasure. Is it also true that Epicurus held the term "pain" to include many *fewer* experiences in life than what most people include when they think of pain?

Post by “kochiekoch” of August 23, 2025 at 5:11 PM

You have to look at the context of the statement. I think that Horace is talking about excessive pain pursuing the pleasure.

[HORACE, Epistles | Loeb Classical Library](#)

Post by “Patrikios” of August 27, 2025 at 12:43 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't have time right now, but it might be instructive to read the first few letters in Book 1:

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to see what Epicurean themes - if any - jump out and whether Horace is providing his own take on the philosophy (whether or not he's a pig in the herd) or not.

[Don](#)

Thanks for the link to the Works of [#Horace](#).

In the 2nd Epistle, **To Lollius**, I interpret that statement as the need to apply prudence. Epicurus taught that wisdom lies in choosing pleasures that maintain long-term well-being rather than short-term gratification, and that may incur some short-term pain.

I found some other interesting Epicurean references in the Letters.

In Epistle 4 **To Albius Tibullus**, it appears that Horace is practicing the Epicurean tradition of **suaveness** in praising the good features of his critic. Then Horace uses **frank speech** to encourage Albius to reconsider the life Horace is living as "**a hog of Epicurus' herd**" as not such a bad life.

Quote

Albius, thou candid critic of my discourses, what shall I say you are now doing in the country about Pedum? Writing what may excel the works of Cassius Parmensis; or sauntering silently among the healthful groves, concerning yourself about every thing worthy a wise and good man? You were not a body without a mind. The gods have given you a beautiful form, the gods [have given] you wealth, and the faculty of enjoying it.

...

*When you have a mind to laugh, you shall see me fat and sleek with good keeping, **a hog of Epicurus' herd.***

Also, in Epistle 18 To Lollius, Horace appears to be explaining how to achieve ataraxia and a life of wellbeing.

Quote

In every thing you must read and consult the learned, by what means you may be enabled to pass your life in an agreeable manner: that insatiable desire may not agitate and torment you, nor the fear and hope of things that are but of little account: whether learning acquires virtue, or nature bestows it? What lessens cares, what may endear you to yourself? What perfectly renders the temper calm; honor or enticing lucre, or a secret passage and the path of an unnoticed life?

I find this question about what "**renders the temper calm**" aligns with

Vatican Saying 79: "*The man who is serene causes no disturbance to himself or to another.*"

This connects to Epicurus' fundamental teaching about ataraxia (tranquility of mind).

Post by "Kalosyni" of August 27, 2025 at 2:16 PM

This line from Horace:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Unless the vessel be sweet, whatever you pour into it turns sour.

...reminds me of Lucretius:

Thread

[The Vessel Analogy At The Opening of Lucretius Book Six](#)

I'd like to ask for input on this question about the opening of book six of Lucretius involving the "vessel" analogy. The text is below, but here's the question:

It appears that Lucretius is separating out two aspects of the defects in the "jar" - (1) the jar is leaking and cannot be filled due to leaks caused by the holes, and (2) that the jar tainted all that it took in as with a foul odor.

As to (1) It seems to me that the leaks can be pretty well identified with the analogy of the [Danaides](#),...



Cassius

September 13, 2023 at 7:06 PM