

# Is There A "Paradox of Hedonism"?

**Post by "LAMAR\_44" of April 4, 2026 at 7:27 AM**

Hi Cassius, thanks for welcoming me. I wanted to speak about the paradox of hedonism. This isn't me arguing against hedonism, but just something I've had trouble in resolving and would love to get everyone's viewpoints here.

Essentially, since we know that pleasure is the sole good, and pain is the sole evil, everything else that we should pursue has the characteristic of being instrumental towards pleasure, and everything we avoid has the characteristic of being instrumental towards pain. This helps significantly in judging what is worthy of pursuit and what isn't. However, it's hard for me to think of this with relationships. I think it makes sense to evaluate before starting a friendship or romantic relationship whether there will be net pleasure or pain, but doing this inside of relationships seems to make them feel shallow and transactional, at least for me.

So now I'm in a paradox. To be a consistent hedonist, I must say that there is no intrinsic value in my relationships with my loved ones, they only have value in so that they're instrumental to my pleasure, but in doing this, I lower my experience of pleasure within these relationships. But that would result in less net pleasure than if I decided to disbelieve in hedonism, so to live according to hedonism, I need to disbelieve in hedonism.

But how can I live according to hedonism while disbelieving in it? And how could I believe in hedonism but not live according to it?

Thanks again everyone!

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 4, 2026 at 8:10 AM**

Good to have you Lamar.

Couple of points:

1 - This is why I don't care to refer to "hedonism" very often. Epicurean philosophy gets placed into that box with certain other groups, but Epicurus is far more subtle than most, and so

"hedonism" gets used as a way to dismiss what Epicurus had to say.

2 - You're basically asking the "friendship" question which is discussed by Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends at the following link. I recommend you read through the full Torquatus section to get a feel for the general approach to all such ethical questions, but friendship in particular starts at 65:

#### [EpicureanFriends Side-By-Side Torquatus](#)

Torquatus himself doesn't take the most aggressive approach, but the most straightforward is the most logical: There is no need to cower in the face of claims that "altruism" or "putting others first" is a categorical imperative. Nature gives us only feelings of pleasure and pain. We take an interest and desire anything only because it brings us pleasure. Once we value a friend or lover highly enough, it brings us pleasure to see their interests fulfilled even if certain interests of ours suffer. And that goes so far that we will at times even die for a friend.

So i wouldn't trouble myself at ALL thinking that you need to live by "hedonism." The standard that applies here at Epicureanfriends and that Epicurus taught is not "hedonism" at all but the entire core of Epicurean philosophy. The fact that you are concerned about this shows that you haven't explored these issues enough -- which is absolutely fine.

#### [Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

but doing this inside of relationships seems to make them feel shallow and transactional, at least for me.

Not to psychologize in your personal situation, but most people pick up this idea from society and general culture, and that's the kind of cultural conditioning that Epicurus warns against when it doesn't make sense when compared to Nature. There is no cosmic or transcental duty of one human being to another human being - bonds of friendship and affection form naturally from community of interest, not because some ideal form exists that compels us in that direction. Examples of this is the discussion of "justice" in the last ten of the [Principal Doctrines](#), and in the discussion of the development of civilization in Lucretius Book 5.

None of us get a deeper understanding of Epicurus without study, and the more we rely on wikipedia or superficial treatments of "hedonism" the more we have to unlearn.

And there's no more complete statement of all this in the ancient record than the full presentation by Torquatus in On Ends.

Glad to have you with us.

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**Post by "Cassius" of April 4, 2026 at 8:22 AM**

Just a little more on this (admittedly largely repeating what I already wrote, but for emphasis):

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

This isn't me arguing against hedonism,

Consistent with what I wrote about above - there's no problem here in arguing against "hedonism." - I will help you in fact, given that I think it's a poor idea to talk about Epicurean philosophy as "hedonism" in any but very limited circumstances. Those who try to pursue or promote "hedonism" outside the framework of Epicurean philosophy -- especially the wider meaning of "pleasure" that Epicurus uses - do have the problems you are concerned about.

It would appear that somewhere you've picked up that there is in fact a "paradox of hedonism" and that's why I titled the new thread that way. No doubt you're right that a lot of people talk that way on Reddit and elsewhere, but there's no reason to accept the terminology of anti-Epicurean thought here at EpicureanFriends.com. It's no paradox - there's a straightforward way of addressing the question.

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of April 4, 2026 at 8:26 AM**

Welcome to the forum [LAMAR 44](#) ...here are my thoughts to give some correction and guidance:

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

pleasure is the sole good, and pain is the sole evil, everything else that we should pursue has the characteristic of being instrumental towards pleasure, and everything we avoid has the characteristic of being instrumental towards pain. This helps significantly in judging what is worthy of pursuit and what isn't.

I think that your wording here makes for an incorrect understanding and application -- the meaning of the word "sole" = only. This sets you up for a big problem, because sometimes we do what is needed for good health and for long-term happiness. If you think with the word "sole" the error could be that your pleasure has to be sensory oriented or somehow a big pleasure. And it is important to understand that anything that we do that doesn't contain painful sensations is also labeled "a pleasure". We also see in the letter to Menoecus: "And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us

as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided."

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

it's hard for me to think of this with relationships. I think it makes sense to evaluate before starting a friendship or romantic relationship whether there will be net pleasure or pain, but doing this inside of relationships seems to make them feel shallow and transactional, at least for me.

Your error here is in thinking too abstractly (net pleasure vs net pain). I think most people wouldn't tolerate a friend who seems to criticize all the time or who is impatient or unkind - we all know how to instinctively avoid these people. Even if the person is a family member (sibling, etc) then we make sure to keep our distance (for self-protection). So as soon as we sense that a potential friend has those characteristics, we should have no qualms in steering clear of making friends with a person like this.

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

I must say that there is no intrinsic value in my relationships with my loved ones, they only have value in so that they're instrumental to my pleasure, but in doing this, I lower my experience of pleasure within these relationships. But that would result in less net pleasure than if I decided to disbelieve in hedonism, so to live according to hedonism, I need to disbelieve in hedonism.

First, regarding your cognition of "pleasure" in relationships -- if you think too abstractly then perhaps that is why you may be for some reason not feeling enjoyment. Joy is a feeling, and it has concrete and specific causes. All relationships are about about a type of "interdependence"...meaning that we "inter-are" and we experience things based on what all the people in the relationship do. Pleasure not only comes from what my loved ones do, but pleasure also comes when I give pleasure to my loved ones.

You don't choose your family, but you choose your friends -- so potentially your friends will be bringing more love and acceptance into your connection and interactions (for example, since in friendships there won't be any conscious or unconscious sibling rivalry that could occur in family relationships).

Regarding your idea of "no intrinsic value except through being instrumental for pleasure" -- there is an error of thinking here also -- because you are again stuck in a concept and have forgotten your heart. The sense of our heart contains the emotions and feelings together with breath of the body and the feelings of aliveness. All of this is the reason why it says in the [Principal Doctrines: PD27](#). "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness

of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship."

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### **Post by “DaveT” of April 4, 2026 at 10:17 AM**

#### [Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

I think it makes sense to evaluate before starting a friendship or romantic relationship whether there will be net pleasure or pain, but doing this inside of relationships seems to make them feel shallow and transactional, at least for me.

For me, this process does not feel shallow or transactional in a negative sense. First as to the transactional, the positive view is apparent in the old saying: you have to be a friend to have a friend. Is it transactional? In my view, yes it is transactional, but so is every interaction with others.

As for shallowness: Some would call romantic relationships a subset of friendships, others--not. I find the study of Epicurus can sometimes divert the student from the realities of intimate relationships. It is not fully explored to my understanding in the writings of Epicurus and his followers. I can only speak to heterosexual romantic relationships. The two women I've lived with over a period of more than 50 years were selected by my (or vice versa! ) through complex mental and physical motivations that are basically undecipherable by me. However, the anticipation of physical and mental pleasure in every way certainly was justly involved. I find nothing wrong with it, indeed I think it is important to use the calculus of pleasure/pain.

Perhaps I've dug too deep into your question, but even for anticipating other friends, no less than long term partners, the process is a gradual one that only comes with engagement over time. Who has not tried to make a friendship and then over time moved away from it for lack of some element of sympatico, as it were? Life is trial and error, and that, I suggest is in the spirit of Epicurus.

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### **Post by “Eikadistes” of April 4, 2026 at 11:10 AM**

#### [Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

I think it makes sense to evaluate before starting a friendship or romantic relationship whether there will be net pleasure or pain, but doing this inside of relationships seems to make them feel shallow and transactional, at least for me.

This is a solid observation, and Epikouros addresses those exact points. In a nutshell, the Garden observes all friendships starting with two individuals providing each other with mutual utility. In the beginning, you're totally right. Friendship can be described as being "transactional".

But I think you already nailed the bigger picture in your thesis, which is that "doing this inside of relationships" lowers the value of the relationship. It really can, and its not acceptable, and Epikouros provides assurance that we cannot betray our friends out of convenience. I think I can provide a few, practical example of this when it comes to sex, death, and betrayal.

#### Quote

Each friendship [is worthwhile], by virtue of itself, but is taken at first for the sake of advantage. (VS 23)

I do like the word "transactional" in the beginning. Regardless, though, a huge goal of friendship is beyond the satisfaction of temporary needs is the cultivation of long-term, loving relationships. To obtain the latter, we have to begin with the former, starting with "I scratch your back...". There's a huge difference between helping each other have an orgasm, versus making a family. Both of those things are happening, but the long-lasting, worthwhile motivation is the latter. (I don't necessarily mean having kids ... that's not for everyone and statistics are divided about that choice. I'll leave that to each person to decide if they're ever ready for that experience).

#### Quote

[F]riendship [arises] according to the needs; Nevertheless it will always be beneficial to offer friendship just as [as it is] for us to plant seeds in the earth, thus [friendship] itself cultivates those communities that [work together to] perfect the pleasures. (10.120)

The otherwise transactional nature of relationships develops into something more valuable. In this regard, practicing vulnerability and forgiveness and holding dialogue to resolve issues is key.

But, you're right, we *should* do our best to practice choice and avoidance with new personalities. It would be absurd to invite someone hostile into a safe space, and wreck your peace.

## Quote

Neither should we accept *the overeager* for friendship, nor *the reluctant...* (VS28)

Hopefully, we can maintain friendly discourse with as many people as possible who are neither hostile to our interests, nor eager to take advantage of our kindness. Still, we are encouraged to distinguish one from the other, which is tricky, and requires trial-and-error:

## Quote

The one who exudes no confidence from the outside is best to bring together a fellowship of friends and consequently befriends the most possible members of one's own kind; and when impossible at least do not vilify as not of one's own species; and so long as *that* was not possible, avoiding contact with them was possible, expelling them from thought so long as the latter of these practices proves to be useful. (Key Doctrine 39)

Though, to speak to your initial concern, I think that we have to practice vulnerability for the greatest gift of friendship, even if vulnerability means that we occasionally get our hearts broken, or get betrayed. The immortal good of friendship is worth taking a reasonable risk.

## Quote

...but still one must take risks for the sake of friendship. (VS28)

Indeed, the wise person will "never abandon a friend" (10.120). The end result of cultivating friendship is so meaningful, so blessed, that it justifies taking personal risks for its sake. Since our love of friends survives death, trying to make friends is always worthwhile.

## Quote

...in defense of loved ones will at some time be ready to die (10.120)

This is the big one that reassures me that the Epicurean approach to ethics disqualifies gross selfishness and manipulation for the sake of strictly personal gain:

We enjoy no pleasure in being dead. There is no future satisfaction in a dead-state that can motivate an Epicurean to die. A person might be tempted to lie, cheat, or steal for an object, money, or power, but there can no, personal motivation for being dead, because nothing can be acquired that would motivate someone to act. There can **only** be motivation for *dying* if it *directly saves a loved one*. Even if dying is awful, and even if the only pleasure received is just a fleeting hope that they'll survive, it's still worth it. The pleasure for which we strive in that moment is the shared pleasure of another who will carry the torch of your friendship after you

are gone.

Granted, there's simultaneously personal avoidance of being emotionally wrecked. The person who betrays a friend condemns themselves to permanent misery. Dying prevents this.

But it also prevents everything else (besides the survivors), so unless death means "paradise", we're not exchanging mutual utility with a friend. What we are doing, in those last moments, is giving them everything we've got, without the expectation that we will ever receive anything ever again. There's nothing lesser about this, and Epíkouros firmly approves of this choice.

Just to quickly address two of your other comments:

Quote

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

... they only have value in so that they're instrumental to my pleasure,

Not with regards to choosing to die for a friend, but that's also a rare situation, so I don't mean to over-use that example. Consider this: **you are so loved by another person, that you have become instrumental to their own complete happiness.** In that regard, we gain pleasure from knowing that we give pleasure to others ("...better to give than receive", so they say). While it's still self-motivated, I am comfortable describing it as a higher purpose.

[Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

in doing this, I lower my experience of pleasure within these relationships.

I wouldn't say "lower" at all, unless you're straight-up objectifying a friend.

Sex is a good example, here. When it's good, both people are providing each other with the same satisfaction. When it's **really** good, it's that first condition, **plus** deep love, or the immortal good of friendship, or emotional security from that gift. When it's bad, one person is gaining more satisfaction from the other. When it's **really** bad, both people are using each other and not even trying to cultivate what could become a beautiful friendship. When it's brutal, one person is explicitly harming the other for their fleeting pleasure.

We definitely lower our experience of pleasure if we treat people like objects. But so long as we see them as fellow subjects, then our mutual transaction becomes something that is infinitely (literally, infinitely, because it survives the death of your friend) more valuable.

This is important, though, because people do change, and sometimes for the worst. No matter how much you love your partner, and no matter how much you've each sacrificed for the other, and no matter how many hours you've spent in couples therapy, any relationship that features domestic abuse has to stop. The health of the subject is more important than their relationship with someone who has become hostile, or has become violent.

Granted, if it's good in the first place, I doubt it will devolve into domestic abuse.

Still, anything's possible. Life is complicated, and families and relationships are everything, everything good, and everything bad. When things get bad, really bad, irrevocably bad, it's important to preserve one's own peace and leave a bad situation. Divorce is important. Without getting disrespectful or too graphic, we had a situation in our extended family where severe, very severe abuse happened from someone who needed to be jailed. Here, the Epicurean insistence of keeping yourself healthy is really, really important. (As it turns out, again, sorry to my family for even bringing it up, but it was religion that kept it going).

But if you've cultivated true love, it's a moot point. Sometimes you gain pleasure from not obtaining things for yourself, but giving them to others. Maybe someday, we'll die to give someone else a future, knowing that we are surrendering every happy thing that we could ever hope to experience again. *A Tale of Two Cities* comes to mind.

Display More

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## Post by “Cassius” of April 4, 2026 at 4:40 PM

It occurs to me to add here that in some of our physics discussions recently we have had reason to focus on the importance of "emergence" or "emergent qualities" to the nature of the way things are.

Probably friendship and love and the issues you are talking about have an analogy there.

At the beginning of any relationship there are simple and direct interactions, but over time those deepen and expand and something emerges that is far different from what was present at the beginning.

For example there's a world of difference between buying a hamburger at a counter and living together for decades, raising a family, etc. And yet the latter type of relationship can emerge from the former, and it is completely proper to consider both of relationships as true and real

and proper, and in no way is one less real or conflicting with the other.

This entire issue of emergence is the path by which we escape the false idea of intelligent design, arbitrary gods, and eternal punishment after death. i don't know that we have record of it being applied in exactly that way but it would be surprising if this example of pleasure weren't related to the way Epicurus analyzed the universe as a whole -- as emerging from simpler starting points.

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### **Post by “LAMAR\_44” of April 6, 2026 at 12:22 AM**

I’ve heard of emergence before, particularly in debates about how the mind arises from the physical. When describing emergence, are you referring to weak/reductive emergence? Where we can map a phenomenon down to its constituent parts, such as a wave being reducible to the location of each water molecule, or are you referring to strong emergence? Something that can’t just be thought of as the sum of its parts but something greater? Like the mind being created by the brain but being above it in a way where you can’t reduce the mind to each neuron in the brain?

So friendship is defined as pleasure created when two or more beings cooperate, as it benefits all parties in fulfilling their own needs, but it emerges into something greater? Either weak emergence where we still map it onto satisfying personal pleasure, but we gain pleasure from viewing the other person’s needs as our own, or is it strong emergence where as the value of friendship now is above just the value of pleasure?

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 6, 2026 at 7:14 AM**

#### [Quote from LAMAR\\_44](#)

something that can’t just be thought of as the sum of its parts but something greater?  
Like the mind being created by the brain but being above it in a way where you can’t reduce the mind to each neuron in the brain?

This is a subject that we have not explored deeply here at the forum, with Sedley's "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism" only recently being first discussed. References to "both levels (atomic and

our world level) being real has been discussed as a result of Sedley's "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism" article mentioned for several years, but even that has not really explored in depth.

I think the answer to your question is probably what you wrote that I have quoted above. For example water is something that most of us probably consider very much more than "the sum of its parts" (atoms of hydrogen and oxygen) . But it would be essential to keep in mind the emphatic limitation that consideration of the emergent quality never crosses over into a "supernatural" quality that implies the existence of an otherworldly intelligence.

This is a great question and no doubt discussion of it will be scattered throughout the forum in the future. Pleasure as discussed in this thread is absolutely one part of the question, as is determinism. For now the original and probably wider discussions are probably focused in these threads:

Thread

**[Connecting Thought With Atoms - Emergence, Downward Causation \(From The Macroscopic To The Atomic\), and Epicurus](#)**

In [today's Zoom](#) and also podcast this issue was discussed as a result of [David Sedley's article "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism."](#) The basic concept as I understand it it likely this:

Epicurus would have understood just as we do today that it is not intuitive how atoms, which have no properties other than shape, size, and weight, can no matter how they combine have the ability to think and assume all the other complex phenomena that we see around us. In even simpler terms, how can atoms which do not...



Cassius

March 29, 2026 at 3:22 PM

Thread

**[Article - David Sedley - 1988 - "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism"](#)**

We've referenced many times on the forum the comments about this topic made by David Sedley in his "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism."

I don't think we previously cited - or that I knew of - an article Dr. Sedley had written directly on point:

Epicurean Anti-Reductionism - 1988 - J. Barnes, M. Mignucci (eds.), Matter and Metaphysics (Naples 1988), 295-327

Full article available here:

[https://www.academia.edu/3051123/Epicurean\\_anti\\_reductionism](https://www.academia.edu/3051123/Epicurean_anti_reductionism)

## Summary of Main Arguments and Highlights

### 1. Core



Cassius

March 26, 2026 at 9:13 AM

Thread

#### [Sedley: "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism"](#)

This is the thread for discussion of the Sedley article on Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism. This is BY FAR the best treatment of this subject I have ever read, and I highly recommend it to everyone who participates in this forum.

David Sedley is an outstanding scholar who is generally very sympathetic to Epicurus, and this article brings together the familiar passages from Lucretius with Sedley's interpretations of Herculaneum fragments from Epicurus' "On Nature." The result is a persuasive...



Cassius

June 3, 2020 at 8:43 AM

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### Post by "Cassius" of April 6, 2026 at 7:29 AM

#### [Quote from LAMAR 44](#)

So friendship is defined as pleasure created when two or more beings cooperate, as it benefits all parties in fulfilling their own needs, but it emerges into something greater? Either weak emergence where we still map it onto satisfying personal pleasure, but we gain pleasure from viewing the other person's needs as our own, or is it strong emergence where as the value of friendship now is above just the value of pleasure?

I don't think Epicurus would consider "the value of friendship above the value of pleasure"

His wider framework is clearly to divide all feelings into pleasure and pain with only pleasure desirable in and of itself. So I think that observation answers your specific question about ranking - friendship is among the pleasures, not "above" pleasure. (Remembering of course that for Epicurus "pleasure" is an extremely broad term that covers everything in life that is desirable.)

I am not familiar with Epicurus dividing emergence into weaker or stronger - only in the materials we have been qualities that are necessary to the identity of the things vs those that are "events" that can change without the thing itself being destroyed.

Certainly pleasures are not all identical, in that they effect different parts of the body, have different intensities, and different durations. And Epicurus refers to "greater pleasure" in the letter to Menoeceus so it would not be necessary to think of friendship as being more than one of the greater - or perhaps greatest - sources of pleasure.