

Ongoing Discussion of Jack Gedney's "Untroubled" Substack Blog

Post by "Don" of May 15, 2026 at 8:05 AM

ADMIN EDIT BY CASSIUS 05-29-26: Don set up this thread initially, and I think him for bringing this to our attention. As the thread has grown in scope i am updating the title to reflect that this thread will be devoted to the ongoing discussion of the Gedney blog. As such, a number of different substack articles will be referenced here. The best understanding of the flow will come from following the discussion from start to finish rather than trying to set up new threads for separate substack articles as they occur. It will be appreciated here that if posters mean to reference only a single article that they include a link to that article in their respective threads.

Image not found or type unknown



[Scholar Spotlight: Tim O'Keefe](#)

Don't take it from me: good work on Epicurean ethics
open.substack.com

Not sure who Jack Gedney is, but this new Substack account looks worth following. He likes Emily Austin's book and references Dewitt.

Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2026 at 8:37 AM

This is not meant to be nearly as negative as it is going to sound. Be sure to read to the last line of my post.

But - here's a quote from the article:

Quote

O'Keefe's latest piece on Epicurean ethics is another work of helpful synthesis. While many correctly note that Epicurean "hedonism" is primarily about the reduction of pain, that bald summary can overlook the next layer of analysis: Epicurus believes that avoiding bodily pain is pretty simple, and that therefore most of our therapeutic attention should go to avoiding *mental* pain. The largest component of mental pain is fear. (Epicurus does also discuss other disturbing emotions such as regret and envy.)

**"Correctly note that Epicurean "hedonism" is primarily about the reduction of pain!"
????**

As a technical statement this means nothing different from saying "primarily about *pleasure*" because absence of pain and pleasure are the same thing.

As a choice of wording in presenting the philosophy it is disastrous. And the elaboration that follows it just digs the hole deeper. The whole line of thinking is not only inaccurate, but it encourages the worst tendencies of seeing the world as mostly suffering, as if through a Buddhist or Stoic prism.

I've read enough of OKeefe over the years to think that this problem isn't attributable to Jack Gedney, but rather it's the sense I've gotten from reading O'Keefe directly. This is exactly why I take O'Keefe very cautiously and do not prefer to cite his articles, even though they often contain very good research and information.

I don't think this is the way Emily Austin conveys Epicurus ("Living for *Pleasure*") and I would consider her work head and shoulders better than OKeefe's.

Other than that I applaud Jack Gedney (I don't know who he is either) for his activity!

Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2026 at 9:10 AM

I am really glad Don posted that article because otherwise I might not have seen it.

It very much helps crystallize my thinking about one of the most important moderating decisions I have to make in administering this forum.

If someone comes here thinking that "*Epicurean 'hedonism' is primarily about the reduction of pain,*" then I would welcome them and welcome the opportunity to explain how that is an inversion of the truth and of the meaning of the reliable ancient texts.

However if someone comes here dedicated to and advocating the idea that "many correctly note that Epicurean 'hedonism' is primarily about the reduction of pain" then that is beyond the terms of our "Community Standards" and "Terms of Use" and our "Not Neo-Epicurean" statement, and their membership will be rescinded.

There are plenty of places on the internet where people can focus on suffering and devote their time to studying Buddhism and Stoicism to the exclusion of and with indifference to joy, delight, pleasure, and happiness as those terms are ordinarily understood by ordinary people.

The purpose of this forum is to study and promote [Classical Epicurean Philosophy](#) as Epicurus taught it. It is extremely important for us to grapple with Epicurus' framing of the term "absence of pain" and explain how Epicurus is about PLEASURE - which can indeed be defined for certain important uses as "absence of pain" or "reduction of pain." But to place PAIN in the center of the philosophy rather than PLEASURE is not what the ancient Epicureans did, and it's not consistent with the mission of this forum to allow for the regular advocacy of that position here.

Again, we'll talk about pleasure and absence of pain as often and as intensely as necessary, but if in the future some new person wishes to join and use their membership to cross over into advocacy for *Epicurean philosophy is primarily about alleviation of suffering* on a regular basis that's something that will not be allowed to continue.

Just to be clear - neither Don nor anyone else here has done that, nor are they anywhere close to doing so. I think it's likely that our "Community Standards" and "Terms of Service" and "Not Neo-Epicurean" statements that are stressed in our registration process have done their intended work, and we don't have dedicated advocates for that position here.

But new people come on the scene all the time, and this is a good opportunity to write something up to address this.

As administrator I have no right or ability to state flatly that "this is" or "this is not" true Epicurean philosophy for the general world and for all time. Everyone has to decide that for themselves. But I do have the right and ability to help steer this forum into the direction set for it when it was launched, and as long as I am here to administrate I will continue to do that.

Peace and love to all!

Post by “Pacatus” of May 15, 2026 at 12:51 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Peace and love to all!

Backatcha! 😊

Post by “wbernys” of May 15, 2026 at 11:21 PM

Quote

For instance, “natural” desires for food or sex are biologically determined and probably can’t be eliminated. To argue for their elimination would be foolish, so instead we should try to manage those desires prudently. In contrast, unnatural desires (which are culturally learned, rather than innate) are more likely candidates for elimination: the desires to be portrayed in public statues or to have a billion dollars, for instance, are clearly not innate, and so it seems plausible to remove those desires through the cognitive training of philosophy.

Here's something i really disagree with on with the TIm O'Keef, and i've been curious about other's opinion on this for a long time.

Does Epicurus mean natural as innate or natural as in nature approves of it? I think Tim O'Keefe misreads natural desires as meaning innate, whereas it actually means "actually helps with pleasure", this is why natural desires can turn into vain or unnatural desires if they become sources of stress or likely to cause harm. It's natural and should be pursued when brining more pleasure than pain but unnatural when not and should be shunned. There is also the fact that i think Epicurus just outright disagrees that sex or lavish food is necessary for happiness and can't be eliminated and he seems to say the opposite below.

[PD30](#): Those natural desires which create no pain when unfulfilled, though pursued with an intense effort, are also due to baseless opinion; and if they are not dispelled, it is not because of their own nature, but because of human vanity.

Emily A. Austin seems to agree with me on this btw.

Quote

While both necessary and extravagant desires earn Epicurus' endorsement as "natural," corrosives desires are both unnatural and unnecessary. Recall that when Epicurus says "unnatural" here, he doesn't mean "artificial". Instead he means contrary to our nature, or not conducive to human well-being. (Pg.50)

Post by “Joshua” of May 16, 2026 at 1:48 AM

I quite like DeWitt on this point;

In respect of his teleology he was also independent of his teachers. It is true that he may have learned of the teleology of Plato from his first teacher Pamphilus, but this brand of teleology became an abomination to him. In his view the universe was eternal and had always been an orderly cosmos. All creationism was thus ruled out and along with creationism all arguments drawn from evidences of divine design or superintendence. As for Praxiphanes, if he took time off from literary criticism to expound the biological teleology of Aristotle, the mind of Epicurus was closed to it, because it was not the Epicurean view that ears had been created to hear with or eyes to see with.⁴⁹ From Nausiphanes, in turn, if he was an orthodox Democritean, no teleology could have been learned at all, because it was inconsistent with a universe of non-purposive atomic motion.

The limited teleology at which Epicurus finally arrived had nothing to do either with creationism or adaptation of organ to function. It had nothing to do with the universe at large, which was ruled by natural laws. It had nothing to do even with animals, although animal behavior afforded evidence that pleasure was the end or telos of living. It was recognized, to be sure, that animals possess volition and that certain kinds of animals are actuated by innate ideas to organize themselves into herds for mutual protection,⁵⁰ but only the rational human being was believed capable of intelligent planning for living and for keeping steadily in view the fact that pleasure is the end or telos ordained by Nature. This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum. For such a belief no teacher had set a precedent.

That's from pages 66-67 of *Epicurus and his Philosophy*. Lucretius had indeed written ([Book IV, line 823](#)) that sight did not exist before the eyes, or language before the tongue; these organs were not created to fulfill a purpose. Rather, their existence afforded the opportunity to be adapted by the organism for the uses with which we now associate them.

In this way the early Epicureans prefigured Charles Darwin, who also wrote about the eye in a well-remembered passage that is often abused by creationists:

Quote

To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of

spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree. Yet reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from a perfect and complex eye to one very imperfect and simple, each grade being useful to its possessor, can be shown to exist; if further, the eye does vary ever so slightly, and the variations be inherited, which is certainly the case; and if any variation or modification in the organ be ever useful to an animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, can hardly be considered real. How a nerve comes to be sensitive to light, hardly concerns us more than how life itself first originated; but I may remark that several facts make me suspect that any sensitive nerve may be rendered sensitive to light, and likewise to those coarser vibrations of the air which produce sound.

But if Epicurus rejected the Platonic and Aristotelian view of teleology, what justification can we make for his continued use of the word *telos* (τέλος)? DeWitt resolves the problem by suggesting that, while Epicurus did throw out creationism and intelligent design, he *did not* wholly reject teleology.

Quote

"This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum."

He enlarges on this theme with a discussion of the word *nature* as opposed to reason on pages 127-132, and here is a relevant excerpt:

Quote

The priority of Nature was also insisted upon in establishing the identity of the end or *telos*. Aristotle had furnished a precious hint in this connection; he wrote "that perhaps even in the case of the lower animals there is some natural good superior to their scale of intelligence which aims at the corresponding good." To this principle Epicurus adapted his procedure. By the promptings of Nature alone, apart from reason, every animate thing, the moment it is born, reaches out for pleasure and shrinks from pain. Consistent with this reasoning is the steady practice of referring to pleasure as "the end of Nature," which occurs five times in our scant remains. As analogous phrases may be cited "the good of Nature" and "the pleasure of Nature," all of them implying that reason played no necessary role in establishing the truth. Similar is the implication of parallel phrases such as "the wealth of Nature," signifying that Nature and not reason reveals the true meaning of wealth; and also "the limits of Nature," implying that Nature and not reason teaches the true limits of the desires.

Post by “Cassius” of May 16, 2026 at 6:04 AM

[Quote from wbernys](#)

Does Epicurus mean natural as innate or natural as in nature approves of it? I think Tim O'Keefe misreads natural desires as meaning innate, whereas it actually means "actually helps with pleasure", this is why natural desires can turn into vain or unnatural desires if they become sources of stress or likely to cause harm. It's natural and should be pursued when bringing more pleasure than pain but unnatural when not and should be shunned. There is also the fact that i think Epicurus just outright disagrees that sex or lavish food is necessary for happiness and can't be eliminated and he seems to say the opposite below.

Depending on how many further responses we get on this I may move Wbernys' comments and responses on this topic to a separate thread given that it seems to regularly be of interest.

Especially the second sentence I underlined:

Can a natural desire turn into an unnatural desire? If so, what does that mean?

Does that mean that the true defining criteria of what should be classified as natural or unnatural is not whether the desire in question is with us at birth, but something about the way we pursue it?

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2026 at 6:16 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Does that mean that the true defining criteria of what should be classified as natural or unnatural is not whether the desire in question is with us at birth, but something about the way we pursue it?

Yes. (Added: something about the way we pursue it to clarify a question noted by [Cassius](#) below)

Maybe it's specificity. The desire for food and drink is natural and necessary and leads to pleasure. The desire for occasional variety or novelty in food and drink is natural but

unnecessary and maintains pleasure. The desire for "an endless string of drinking parties and festivals" is unnatural and unnecessary does not lead to pleasure in the end but rather leads ultimately to more pain than pleasure.

I would go so far as to say the desire for an occasional drinking party or festival is a natural but unnecessary desire. However, I find it interesting that Epicurus uses the word πότος (potos) and not συμπόσιον (symposion) "symposium, drinking-party." He wrote a book or dialogue entitled Symposium in which he wrote "Even when drunk, the wise one will not talk nonsense or act silly." So, Epicurus didn't seem to oppose drinking wine or attending drinking-parties. There seems to be a distinction between πότος and συμπόσιον, possibly with the difference being one of emphasis on drinking versus conviviality.

A κῶμος is "a village festival: a revel, carousal, merry-making, Latin: comissatio." They seem to have involved crowned revelers parading the streets, bearing torches, singing, dancing, and "playing frolics."

Note that he doesn't say you can't attend a drinking party or take part in village festivals! He's saying life shouldn't be an "endless string" of them (οὐ συνέροντες "not stringing together"). That's going to lead to more pain than pleasure in the end.

That might not hold up in every natural/unnatural desire situation, but I would be interested to see if others hold up under this paradigm.

And just to remind everyone: natural/unnatural & necessary/unnecessary refers to desires and not pleasure. This reminder is as much for myself as the the thread.

Post by "Cassius" of May 16, 2026 at 9:00 AM

Ok there Don you're addressing the full categorization scheme by referencing necessary/unnecessary.

What if we focus precisely on one of the aspects of what wbernys said:

Can something that is a "natural desire" turn into an unnatural desire?

I think a lot of the confusion comes from the appropriate thought that we ought to be able to construct a table with "natural desires" in one column and "unnatural desires" on the other so that we can see clearly what distinguishes the two categories.

If "desire for food" is natural but "desire for caviar" is not, then should we not be able to consider them as forever separate so that we can see what element or aspect must be "added

to" the desire for food in order to identify something that is unnatural?

And we ought to be able to do that separate from considering the "necessary" part.

Separate and apart from any other topic, what makes something "natural" and something else "unnatural"? It's NOT simply a question of "is it present at birth?" Or is it?

I presume your "Yes" means you think that you don't think it is sufficient to say "the desire was present at birth."

Separate and apart from the necessary criteria, what does "natural" mean? Because I can see someone arguing that if it's natural, it's natural from the start and forever, just like atoms have shape, size, and weight.

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2026 at 9:42 AM

Good questions, [Cassius](#) . I'll circle back to those. However, I think we need to acknowledge that Epicurus didn't use natural and unnatural all the time. In the Menoikeus, he wrote:

Quote

Furthermore, on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself.

Not natural and unnatural, but natural, "empty," and necessary. He didn't even use unnecessary in that text.

If course. [PD29](#) does use the familiar categories:

Among desires, some are natural and necessary, some are natural and unnecessary, and some are unnatural and unnecessary (arising instead from groundless opinion).

And VS20 as it appears in the manuscript:

Of the desires, on the one hand, there are the natural and necessary; then the natural ones and the not necessary ones; then the not natural and not necessary arising from empty belief.

MFS's recently posted translation of Oinoanda include:

[for us to show] which of the desires are natural, and which are vain.

Of the desires some are vain, others nat-

Now, those that are natural seek after such things as are [necessary] for our nature's enjoyment, [while those that are vain] ...

Yes, I'm picking nits but they're nits that deserve picking.

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2026 at 10:00 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I presume your "Yes" means you think that you don't think it is sufficient to say "the desire was present at birth

Actually my yes was responding to "something about the way we pursue it"

Post by “Cassius” of May 16, 2026 at 10:09 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Yes, I'm picking nits but they're nits that deserve picking.

Yes I very much agree that this needs deep analysis.

Post by “Todd” of May 16, 2026 at 10:10 AM

I think there is a simple answer to the meaning of natural/unnatural. It refers to the criterion provided by nature: the feelings.

A natural desire is one that is likely to result in net pleasure if fulfilled.

An unnatural desire is one that we only imagine as likely to produce pleasure, but in fact is likely result in net pain. Also referred to as "vain and empty". The first definition that comes up when I search "vain" is "not yielding the desired outcome; fruitless" - the desired outcome being pleasure. Empty means empty of pleasure.

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2026 at 10:14 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Separate and apart from the necessary criteria, what does "natural" mean? Because I can see someone arguing that if it's natural, it's natural from the start and forever, just like atoms have shape, size, and weight.

As is my wont, let's consult [LSJ](#): The word Epicurus uses is φυσικός (physikos) "natural, produced or caused by nature, inborn, native; of or concerning the order of external nature, natural, physical." So, I take that to mean a desire which is aligned with the natural order of things, in other words, a desire which aligns with the natural order of seeking pleasure. If a desire leads to pain with no accompanying pleasure (I'm thinking the desire for the pleasure of a *healthy body* via the *pain* of exercise is natural) that's an "empty/vain/corrosive" desire.

Post by “Cassius” of May 16, 2026 at 10:18 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

As is my wont, let's consult LSJ: The word Epicurus uses is φυσικός (physikos) "natural, produced or caused by nature, inborn, native; of or concerning the order of external nature, natural, physical." So, I take that to mean a desire which is aligned with the natural order of things, in other words, a desire which aligns with the natural order of seeking pleasure. If a desire leads to pain with no accompanying pleasure (I'm thinking the desire for the pleasure of a *healthy body* via the *pain* of exercise is natural) that's an "empty/vain/corrosive" desire.

Ok well now if I understand you that, that would be to consider nature as "aligned with the goal of nature" and NOT "inborn with us at birth." Presumably there could be something destructive inborn in us at birth that is NOT aligned with the goal of nature, thus those are two different

things.

So you are in the "alignment with nature's goal" camp rather than "inborn at birth" camp?

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2026 at 10:23 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So you are in the "alignment with nature's goal" camp rather than "inborn at birth" camp?

I don't know whether I'd say I'm encamped. That sounds like I'm queueing up for battle. But yeah that appears to be my current (checks watch) perspective.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

nature as "aligned with the goal of nature"

As aligned with the natural goal of seeking pleasure. The way you stated it seems more of a tautology.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Presumably there could be something destructive inborn in us at birth that is NOT aligned with the goal of nature, thus those are two different things.

Agreed, but I'd like us to come up with examples before we plant that flag. According to Epicurus, ALL our actions, decisions, etc. ultimately end up as a pursuit of pleasure.

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2026 at 10:39 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

I think there is a simple answer to the meaning of natural/unnatural. It refers to the criterion provided by nature: the feelings.

A natural desire is one that is likely to result in net pleasure if fulfilled.

An unnatural desire is one that we only imagine as likely to produce pleasure, but in fact is likely result in net pain. Also referred to as "vain and empty". The first definition that comes up when I search "vain" is "not yielding the desired outcome; fruitless" - the desired outcome being pleasure. Empty means empty of pleasure.

Agreed. Well stated.

Post by “Cassius” of May 16, 2026 at 9:22 PM

I just realized that I forgot to include something that I always try to mention when the subject of Tim O'Keefe or any other professor comes up.

I try not to judge Tim O'Keefe or really even Emily Austin as primarily *advocates* for Epicurean philosophy. As far as I know they are professional educators and they aren't hired or for all I know allowed to be the kind of advocates for the philosophy that I attribute to the members of the school such as Lucretius or Diogenes of Oinoanda in the ancient world.

I've never read anything from Tim O'Keefe or most of these other academics either stating that they are personally endorsing what they write about. To some extent some sympathy with their subject is implicit, but they are not obligated to put the most sympathetic face on the Epicurean viewpoint. Certainly Cyril Bailey did not do that, and he is one of the authorities we rely on most for his translations. But I do keep in mind that Bailey very clearly stated that he did not agree with many of Epicurus' ethical positions.

So I just want to be sure to say that I've found a lot of valuable information whenever I've read Tim O'Keefe material. I just wouldn't look to him for an explanation of the Epicurean viewpoint from a position of advocating the most persuasive form of it that is possible.

Post by “Patrikios” of May 19, 2026 at 10:38 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I try not to judge Tim O'Keefe or really even Emily Austin as primarily advocates for Epicurean philosophy. As far as I know they are professional educators and they aren't hired or for all I know allowed to be the kind of advocates for the philosophy that I attribute to the members of the school such as Lucretius or Diogenes of Oinoanda in the ancient world.

[Cassius](#)

There is a Comment to Geddy's posting about O'Keefe, by **D.S. Griffin**, which follows much of the statements by you and [Don](#) .

Quote

O'Keefe's work is detailed and documented and he is a serious scholar. His papers on friendship, natural desires, and wealth are all worth the time to read. But the framing in his paper on Achieving Tranquility is problematic.

O'Keefe writes that Epicurean hedonism is primarily about the reduction of pain.

That single sentence does real damage. Epicurus was explicit. Pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. Not pain management. Not suffering reduction. Pleasure. Putting pain at the center rather than pleasure doesn't just shift the emphasis - it quietly imports a Buddhist or Stoic prism onto a philosophy that was built in direct opposition to both.

This isn't a minor semantic quibble. A reader who absorbs that Epicureanism is primarily about reducing pain walks away with a completely different philosophy than the one Epicurus actually taught. That framing makes Epicureanism sound like damage control for a life that is fundamentally difficult. The actual philosophy is a full throated argument that pleasure is the natural guide of every living thing from birth and that a life organized around that fact is genuinely available to anyone willing to think clearly about what they actually need.

Epicureanism keeps getting filtered through frameworks that dilute it. Buddhist suffering. Stoic virtue in disguise. Humanist civic obligation. Academic hedging that sands down the sharpest edges. O'Keefe's framing here is a milder version of the same problem. Epicurean philosophy doesn't need rehabilitation or translation into more respectable terms. It needs to be stated as Epicurus stated it.

[Pleasure is the guide of life.](#)

Display More

Here is the response from the author of the post, **Jack Gedney**., which provides the direct quotes from Epicurus, supporting O'Keefe's premise.

Quote

I think O'Keefe is being entirely true to Epicurus here. The redefinition of pleasure (compared to the popular conception) as the absence of pain is front and center in the core ethical texts.

Principal Doctrine 3 states that "***The greatest magnitude of pleasure possible is the removal of all suffering.***" The Letter to Menoeceus 128 says "***Everything we do is for this purpose: the avoidance of pain in our body and fear in our mind*** ." A few lines later comes the sentence you quote, but the full version says this: "***For it is when we feel pain from the absence of pleasure that we require pleasure; when all our pain has been relieved, we need no further pleasure. This is why we say that pleasure is the beginning and end of a blessed life.***"

As you note, O'Keefe is a serious scholar who makes sure to document his claims well, and there is plenty of evidence for this emphasis in the original texts. The ancient Epicureans clearly talked extensively about pain management, increasing security, and reducing painful emotions, while relegating positive pleasures to minor "variation" rather than actual amplification of happiness.

How is the response from Geddy supporting O'Keefe not a valid viewpoint on Epicurus' writings?

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2026 at 12:05 PM

Because he is ignoring the well documented point, stressed by Torquayus as well, that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, and that the absence of one is the presence of the other.

He is talking as if less pain is something different and better than more pleasure when in fact they are exactly the same thing.

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2026 at 12:34 PM

Also (and there are many other arguments) it is not proper to take a single sentence and not consider it in the context of the full analysis of pleasure as to whether it has a limit, which is what Plato had argued in [Philebus](#). The main reason to consider the total removal of all pain to be the limit of pleasure of pleasure is that unless you can logically define a limit for pleasure, pleasure can always be made better by adding more.

The citations from Plato and Seneca that document this argument about pleasure from the opposing side are in the "Full Cup" article here on the site.

Post by "Don" of May 19, 2026 at 1:23 PM

So, here's the question: Do we engage with the author at his Substack comments? Is it useful to do so?

Okay. I waded into the fray at the Substack for better or worse.

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2026 at 1:45 PM

Good luck Don. Always good to try when there is any hope of success. Here is a summary of the major arguments that appear scattered in many places on this site:

"Why It Is Incorrect to Say Epicurean Philosophy Is Primarily About 'Absence of Pain'"

Quote

"For this reason we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good." -- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*

The Claim and Why It Matters

The claim that Epicurean philosophy is "primarily about the absence of pain" — that the Epicurean goal is a passive, featureless neutral state free from disturbance — is one of the most consequential misreadings in the history of philosophy. It transforms a vigorous, life-affirming system into something that looks, in practice, indistinguishable from the Stoic, Buddhist, or ascetic counsels that Epicurus directly opposed.

The arguments against this reading are numerous, mutually reinforcing, and grounded in the primary texts. They are collected here in condensed form.

Argument 1: There Are Only Two Feelings — Absence of One Is Presence of the Other

This is the most fundamental argument, and it dissolves the apparent contrast between "pleasure" and "absence of pain" entirely.

- Epicurus taught that Nature has given every living creature exactly **two internal feelings**: pleasure and pain.
- These two are **exhaustive and mutually exclusive** — there is no third state between them.
- **If pain is absent, pleasure is present** — not by convention or definition, but because there are only two options and one of them is gone.
- "Absence of pain" and "presence of pleasure" are therefore **two ways of describing the same condition**, not two different things.

Quote

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

Quote

"Surely anyone who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain." -- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* 1.38

Quote

"I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too." -- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* 2.16

- **The practical consequence:** Saying the Epicurean goal is "absence of pain" rather than "pleasure" is like saying the goal is "not being in darkness" rather than "being in light." The two phrases pick out the same state from opposite directions. The choice to emphasize the negative formulation is a rhetorical one, not a philosophical one — and it is a rhetorical choice that consistently misleads general audiences toward passivity and minimalism.

Argument 2: The Letter to Menoecus Cannot Be Read Through a Single Sentence Torn From Context

The passage most often cited as evidence for the "absence of pain" reading is this one:

Quote

"When we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality... but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind." -- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*

This sentence is real — but reading it in isolation while ignoring everything around it is a fundamental error of method. The *Letter to Menoecus* as a whole says the opposite of what the "absence of pain" reading requires:

- **The letter opens** by stating that philosophy leads to **happiness** — not tranquility, not absence of pain, but happiness.
- **The letter explicitly declares** that "pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life" and "the first good innate in us."
- **The contested passage** is not Epicurus saying "I don't mean pleasure; I mean absence of pain." It is Epicurus clarifying that "pleasure" in his usage is broader than physical stimulation of the body — it **includes** freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance as genuine pleasures, not as replacements for pleasure.
- **The letter closes** with the vision of the wise man living "like a god among men" — a life of **full positive pleasure**, not minimal disturbance.

Reading one sentence against the grain of the entire letter is precisely the kind of selective citation that produces the misreading. The rule applies here as everywhere: a single passage, read in isolation, cannot overturn the consistent testimony of the whole.

Argument 3: Principal Doctrine 3 Is a Targeted Response to a Specific Philosophical Opponent — Not a Summary of Epicurean Ethics

Principal Doctrine 3 states:

Quote

"The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in 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."

This doctrine has been taken as definitive proof that Epicurus reduced the goal of life to the mere absence of pain. That reading mistakes the context entirely.

- **PD3 is the third in a deliberate sequence of responses** to the three most powerful ancient arguments used to attack pleasure as the goal of life:
 - **PD1** answers the argument from divine punishment: a truly blessed being has no interest in rewarding or punishing humans.
 - **PD2** answers the argument from fear of death: death is the end of all sensation, so neither good nor evil follows it.
 - **PD3 and PD4** answer the argument from Plato's *Philebus*: that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it has no limit and therefore can never be complete.
- **Plato's challenge** was: pleasure can always be increased; it is never finished; a thing that cannot be completed cannot be the highest good.
- **Epicurus's answer** (PD3): pleasure *does* have a limit — the limit is reached when all pain is removed, because at that point there is no more pain to displace. The cup is full. What Plato said could never be complete is in fact complete.
- **What PD3 is *not* doing**: It is not saying that the content of a good life is merely the absence of pain. It is establishing that the *measure of fullness* — the philosophical limit that answers Plato — is the removal of pain. The content of the full life remains what Epicurus stated throughout all his writings: the pleasures of taste, hearing, sight, friendship, philosophy, memory, and anticipation.

- **The analogy:** PD3 tells us the cup is full when it reaches the brim. It says nothing about what fills the cup. Those who read PD3 as defining the Epicurean goal have confused the measurement of fullness with the content being measured.
-

Argument 4: Epicurus Stated Explicitly What He Could Not Conceive the Good Without

There is no ambiguity about this:

Quote

"I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form." -- Epicurus, in Diogenes Laertius, Book X

Quote

"For my part I find no meaning which I can attach to what is termed good, if I take away from it the pleasures obtained by taste, if I take away the pleasures which come from listening to music, if I take away too the charm derived by the eyes from the sight of figures in movement, or other pleasures by any of the senses in the whole man." -- Epicurus, as quoted by Cicero, Tusculan Disputations

- These are not the words of a man who thought the good life consisted in a passive neutral state free from disturbance.
 - These are the words of a man for whom the positive content of pleasure — vivid, sensory, active, varied — is inseparable from what "good" even means.
 - A philosophy whose goal is "primarily absence of pain" would not generate statements like this. A philosophy whose goal is genuine, active, positive pleasure would — and does.
-

Argument 5: The Ancient Witnesses Are Unanimous That the Goal Is Active, Vivid Pleasure

Both friendly and hostile ancient sources understood Epicurus to be teaching active pleasure, not passive absence of disturbance:

- **Torquatus** (Cicero's Epicurean spokesman): "*Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?*"
- **Diogenes of Oinoanda** (carved in stone for all passersby): "*I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the **fullness of pleasure.***"
- **Cicero** (a hostile critic, which makes his testimony all the more telling): "*[The Epicureans said] that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures*" — the Latin is unambiguous: *plena et conferta voluptatibus*, a life **full and crammed** with pleasures.
- **Torquatus** again: "*The wise man is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains.*"

A philosophy primarily about "absence of pain" would not be described by its ancient advocates and critics alike as a philosophy of numerous, vivid, crammed-full pleasures.

Argument 6: The Friendship Argument — Why "Minimize Pain" Cannot Be the Prime Directive

This argument is practical and penetrating. Frances Wright's *A Few Days In Athens* captures it clearly:

- Deep friendship is one of the greatest pleasures Epicurus identified.
- Deep friendship inevitably ends in grief for one of the parties — grief that is among the sharpest pains available to human experience.
- A person whose goal was *primarily to minimize pain* would rationally avoid deep friendship, moderate every attachment, guard against every commitment that might later hurt.
- The Epicurean does the opposite — pursues friendship **gladly, deliberately, and without reservation** — because the pleasures of shared life, mutual support, and being truly known vastly outweigh the cost of eventual grief.
- The pain of grief is accepted willingly as the price of the pleasure that made it possible.

The conclusion: If "absence of pain" were the prime directive, Epicurus would counsel against deep friendship. He counseled the opposite — calling friendship "the greatest of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life." The Epicurean goal must be stated as the **maximum of pleasure**, not the minimum of pain. These are not the same thing, and the difference shapes every practical choice.

Argument 7: "The Goal of Life Is Absence of Pain" as a Standalone Phrase Is Liable to Systematic Misinterpretation

Even where the phrase is technically defensible (because of the two-feelings doctrine), it consistently misleads:

- Most people who encounter "the goal is absence of pain" without full context will interpret it as recommending a **passive, neutral, featureless state** — essentially philosophical nothingness.
- The phrase echoes **Buddhist and Stoic counsels** of detachment and desire-suppression, and listeners draw exactly that connection — the opposite of the Epicurean position.
- The Epicurean texts warn explicitly against this misuse. The correct approach is to **lead with pleasure as the positive goal** and introduce the equivalence with "absence of pain" as secondary clarification, not as the primary summary.
- Presenting the Epicurean goal as "absence of pain" to a general audience without full explanation produces a picture of Epicurus as an ascetic minimalist — the precise opposite of what Torquatus described and what Diogenes of Oinoanda carved into stone.

Argument 8: The "Limit" Is Not the Goal — The Full Cup Model

The appropriate analogy - as used in the opening of Lucretius Book Six - is that of a "full cup" or "full vessel" which makes the relevant distinction precisely:

- The **limit of pleasure** (where pain is fully removed) is the measure of whether the cup is full — it is the *criterion of completeness*.
- The **content of pleasure** (the varied, vivid, active pleasures that fill the cup) is what the good life actually consists of.
- Confusing the measure of fullness with the content is like saying a feast is "primarily about not being hungry." Not being hungry is what a completed feast achieves — but the feast consists of food, company, and enjoyment, not of the absence of hunger.
- The full cup cannot be made fuller — but it is **full**, not empty.

Quote

"[T]he Epicureans said that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures." -- Cicero, *In Defense of Publius Sestius* 10.23

A crammed-full cup is not a description of an "absence of pain" philosophy. It is the description of a philosophy of positive, active, abundant pleasure — guided by reason to ensure the cup is sound and the pleasures genuine.

Argument 9: The Three Distorting Traditions That Produced This Reading

The "absence of pain" reading did not arise from careful study of the full panoply of available texts. It arose from three cultural filters that have operated on Epicurus for centuries, all pushing in the same direction:

- **The Stoic filter:** Stoics found it useful to read Epicurus as a failed Stoic — someone whose *ataraxia* was essentially Stoic *apatheia* in different language. Domesticating Epicurus as a philosopher of tranquility served the Stoic agenda.
- **The religious filter:** For traditions that regard pleasure as morally suspect, reading Epicurus as a philosopher of inner peace (rather than pleasure) makes him theologically more comfortable. The cost is misreading him.
- **The Humanist filter:** Modern Humanism's emphasis on rational self-restraint and the subordination of appetite to principle makes the "tranquility" reading of Epicurus more acceptable than his actual teaching. Again, comfort is purchased at the price of accuracy.

All three filters consistently distort the reading of Epicurus in the same direction: away from pleasure (which sounds too bodily, too individual) and toward tranquility (which sounds elevated and dignified). All three produce an Epicurus who is no longer recognizably Epicurean.

Argument 10: The Historical Record of Epicurean Lives Contradicts the Ascetic Picture Entirely

If Epicurean philosophy were primarily about the absence of pain — about minimizing desire, withdrawing from engagement, and seeking a passive featureless calm — we would expect to find this reflected in the lives of the Epicurean leaders themselves. We find the opposite at every turn.

Epicurus's own life and property:

- At his death, Epicurus held extensive property — the Garden, his house inside the walls of Athens, and other holdings — and bequeathed them formally by will to continue the school's work.
- The Garden was not a remote rural hermitage. It stood on the **Dromos**, the most traveled ceremonial thoroughfare in Athens — the main road from the Dipylon Gate to Plato's Academy, thirty-nine meters wide in places, used for the great Panathenaic procession and by travelers, merchants, diplomats, and students daily. Epicurus was not hiding. He was on the main road.
- At the gate of the Garden, Epicurus posted an explicit public welcome: "*Hospes hic bene manebis, hic summum bonum voluptas est*" — "**O Guest, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.**" He advertised the philosophy on one of the busiest roads in the ancient world and invited every passerby in.
- Epicurus maintained correspondence with friends and followers across the entire Greek world — not a small isolated community but an extensive network.
- He hosted regular meals and dinners, enjoyed wine, engaged in philosophical conversation as a positive pleasure, and is documented as owning slaves and managing the substantial finances of a large and active school.
- Not a single ancient source describes Epicurus as ascetic, minimalistic, or withdrawn from the city and its life. The description of a recluse in a sealed private retreat is, as the evidence establishes, a fiction.

No Epicurean leader of the ancient world is famed for asceticism:

- Metrodorus, Hermarchus, Colotes, and the other early Epicurean leaders were active, engaged participants in philosophical debate — writing polemical works, corresponding with opponents, building institutions.
- **Philodemus** (1st century BC) lived and worked in the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum — one of the grandest private estates in the Roman world — as the philosophical associate of **Lucius Calpurnius Piso**, the father-in-law of Julius Caesar and a man of enormous wealth and political influence. A philosopher whose goal was "absence of pain" in the minimalist sense would not be living in a villa of extraordinary luxury surrounded by one of the largest private libraries of antiquity. Philodemus also wrote prolifically — dozens of surviving works — precisely to bring Epicurean philosophy to the educated Roman public.
- **Diogenes of Oinoanda** (2nd century AD) spent his personal fortune commissioning a **massive stone inscription** — covering the entire wall of a public stoa in his city — so that every passerby could read the Epicurean philosophy for free. He states his reason explicitly: he wanted to spread the benefits of philosophy as widely as possible before his death. This is the action of a man who understood his goal as the active promotion of the fullest possible pleasurable life for others — not of a man who thought the goal was

passive withdrawal.

- **Torquatus** and **Cassius Longinus**, the most prominent Roman Epicureans of the late Republic, were men of the first political and military rank. Cassius organized the conspiracy against Caesar from Epicurean philosophical conviction. Neither resembles an ascetic minimalist by any stretch.

Epicurean leaders actively recruited outsiders:

- Epicurus himself wrote extensively and distributed his works to friends and strangers across the Greek world — the explicit purpose being to share the philosophy and bring others to live well.
- Philodemus's entire career was oriented toward making Epicurean philosophy accessible to Roman intellectual and political society — the opposite of sectarian withdrawal.
- Diogenes of Oinoanda carved philosophy into stone for *all who pass by* — Greeks and non-Greeks alike, as he states explicitly. His inscription was a form of philosophical outreach without parallel in the ancient world.
- The Epicurean school's warm communal culture — the birthday celebrations of Epicurus, the letters of philosophical friendship, the welcoming of women and slaves as full participants — was explicitly designed to draw people in, not to wall them out.

Epicurean sympathies in the courts of the powerful:

- **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, the Seleucid king whose court had Epicurean sympathies, established a Gymnasium in Jerusalem — the institutional center of Hellenistic philosophical culture — not a monastery.
- **Empress Pompeia Plotina**, wife of Trajan and one of the most powerful women in Rome, was a documented and devoted Epicurean. Her personal letter to Hadrian begins: "*How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord.*" She intervened successfully to change Roman law governing the Epicurean school's succession in Athens. Upon her death, Hadrian deified her and built temples in her honor. The Epicurean school's most prominent imperial patron was a woman at the center of Roman power — not a recluse.

The friendship argument as lived practice:

- Friendship — demanding, deep, reciprocal, grief-risking friendship — was not a theoretical value for these leaders. It was the organizing principle of how they lived. Epicurus's deathbed letter to Idomeneus celebrates friendship. Philodemus's philosophical work on frank speech (*parrhesia*) is organized entirely around the practices of genuine friendship within philosophical community. Diogenes of Oinoanda's inscription is itself an act of friendship extended to strangers.
- Friendship of this kind is neither minimalistic nor ascetic. It requires investment — of time, attention, emotional vulnerability, practical resources — and it generates the kinds of experiences that make "absence of pain" a grossly inadequate description of what the

Epicureans were living.

The verdict of the historical record: Not one of the known Epicurean leaders — Epicurus, Metrodorus, Hermarchus, Philodemus, Diogenes of Oinoanda, Torquatus, Cassius Longinus, Pompeia Plotina — lived a life that could honestly be described as organized around minimizing stimulation or withdrawing from engagement. Every one of them was active, connected, productive, and committed to bringing others into the philosophy. The ascetic minimalist picture is a later distortion, not a historical reality.

Summary: What the Texts Actually Say

Claim	What the Texts Say
The goal is "absence of pain"	<i>"Pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life."</i> — Letter to Menoecus
The goal is tranquility/ataraxia	<i>"Pleasure is the end of the best mode of life."</i> — Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 32
PD3 defines the Epicurean goal	PD3 answers Plato's "no limits" argument; it does not summarize Epicurean ethics
The wise man seeks minimal stimulation	<i>"Numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind."</i> — Torquatus
"Absence of pain" and "pleasure" are different things	<i>"Surely anyone conscious of his condition must be either in pleasure or in pain."</i> — Torquatus
Epicurus couldn't conceive the good without active pleasure	<i>"I know not how to conceive the good apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound."</i> — Epicurus

Conclusion

Saying that Epicurean philosophy is "primarily about the absence of pain" is wrong in multiple independent ways simultaneously:

1. It violates the two-feelings doctrine — absence of pain simply *is* pleasure.
2. It reads a single clause of the *Letter to Menoecus* against the plain meaning of the whole letter.
3. It treats PD3 as a summary of Epicurean ethics when it is a targeted response to a specific philosophical opponent.
4. It contradicts Epicurus's own explicit statements about what he could not conceive the good without.

5. It is flatly contradicted by every ancient witness, friendly and hostile alike.
6. It produces practical counsel (minimize attachments, avoid risk of grief) that Epicurus explicitly rejected.
7. It misleads general audiences by suggesting something like Buddhist or Stoic detachment — the precise opposite of what Epicurus taught.

The Epicurean goal is **a life full of positive pleasure** — crammed full, as the ancient testimony puts it — pursued wisely so that the pleasures are real, lasting, and uncontaminated by the greater pains that foolish pursuit would bring. Absence of pain describes the same state from the negative side, because where pain ends, pleasure begins — but this logical equivalence should never be mistaken for an endorsement of the *empty* cup over the *full* one.

The goal is fullness. Not emptiness.

Post by “Cassius” of May 19, 2026 at 2:08 PM

So I can keep track of it I have added an easier-to-read format of it here. This is the version I will be updating going forward:

[Why It Is Incorrect to Say Epicurean Philosophy Is Primarily About 'Absence of Pain'](#)

A condensed presentation of the arguments against reducing Epicurean philosophy to the goal of 'absence of pain' — showing why this reading misrepresents the...
epicurustoday.com

Post by “Cassius” of May 19, 2026 at 3:43 PM

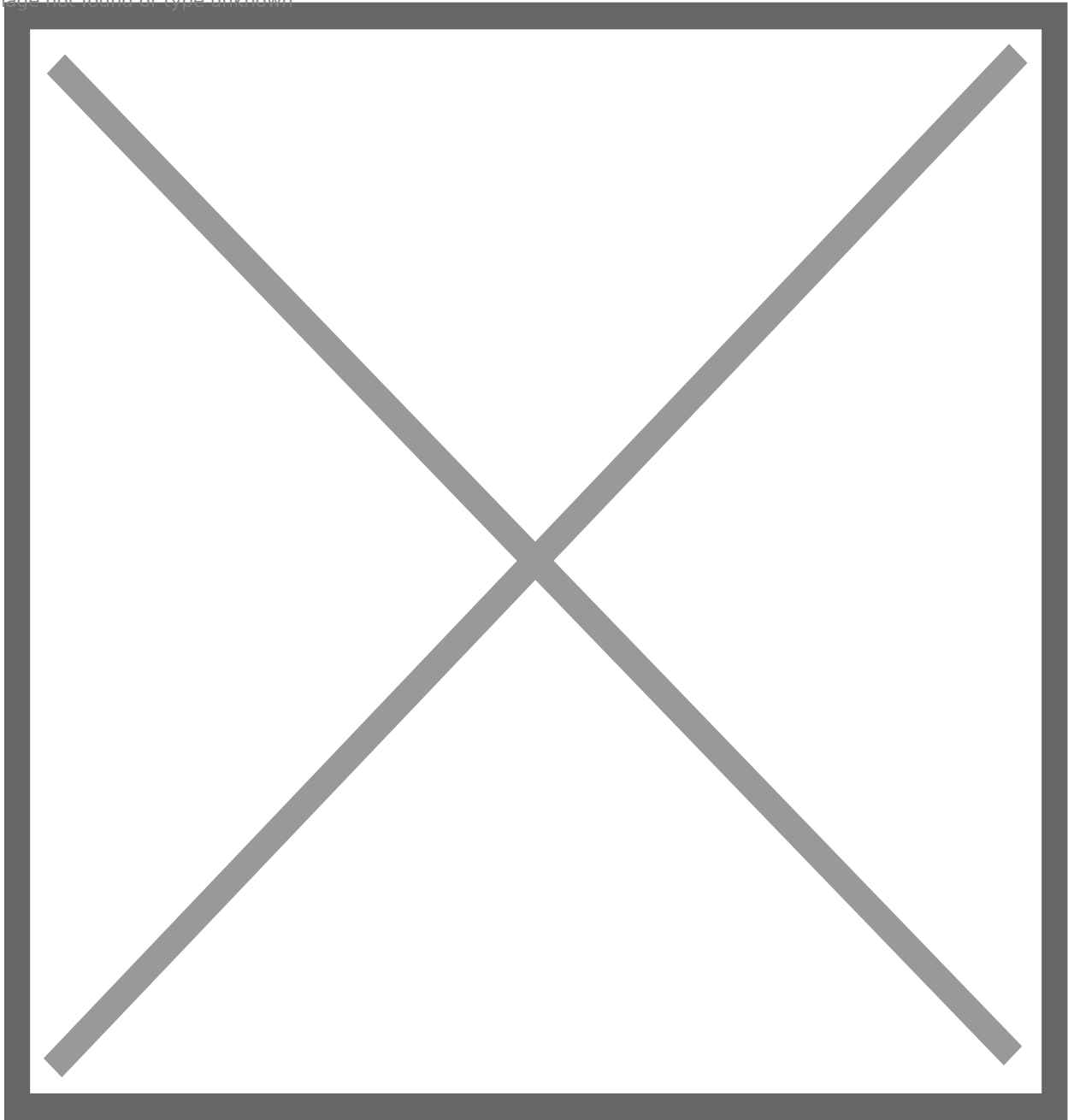
I should have realized when I came up with an odd number of nine arguments that I was missing something.

I have now added in a tenth, which I actually think is one of the most compelling of all. I should not have forgotten it.

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2026 at 8:10 AM

I've posted the list of arguments on substack:

Image not found or type unknown



[Why It Is Incorrect to Say Epicurean Philosophy Is Primarily About "Absence of Pain"](#)

The Claim and Why It Matters

open.substack.com

Post by "Titus" of May 20, 2026 at 8:22 AM

[Quote from wbernys](#)

Does Epicurus mean natural as innate or natural as in nature approves of it? I think Tim O'Keefe misreads natural desires as meaning innate, whereas it actually means "actually helps with pleasure", this is why natural desires can turn into vain or unnatural desires if they become sources of stress or likely to cause harm. It's natural and should be pursued when bringing more pleasure than pain but unnatural when not and should be shunned. There is also the fact that I think Epicurus just outright disagrees that sex or lavish food is necessary for happiness and can't be eliminated and he seems to say the opposite below.

My interpretation has always been that of the natural desires being key factors to focus on. I somewhat would agree that they are "innate" in the sense that they are indiscutible and inherently connected with our being. Not caring for one's health and security/social connections is disastrous. I am confronted with these points every single day, may it be at work, outside or within my social sphere.

Instead, people focus on anything else and do not realize on what basis their house is built on. My life isn't perfect either, but I realize that focusing on natural desires and meditating (finally transferring into action) these points is a great source of realizing what really matters. From there on I refer to Diogenes from Oinoanda:

"when the emotions which disturb the soul are removed, those which produce pleasure enter into it to take their place"

Diogenes of Oinoanda, fragment 34

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The purpose of this forum is to study and promote [Classical Epicurean Philosophy](#) as Epicurus taught it. It is extremely important for us to grapple with Epicurus' framing of the term "absence of pain" and explain how Epicurus is about PLEASURE - which can indeed be defined for certain important uses as "absence of pain" or "reduction of pain." But to place PAIN in the center of the philosophy rather than PLEASURE is not what the ancient Epicureans did, and it's not consistent with the mission of this forum to allow for the regular advocacy of that position here.

Maybe this discussion about "absence of pain" is an "English speaker thing". I remember Epicurus receiving a more nuanced interpretation in e.g. German literature. The "absence of pain" discussion is known there as well, but Epicurus is still the philosopher of pleasure (sometimes rather translated to "joy" which is perhaps a good term to include both the status of a healthy being and experiencing appreciated feelings). Obviously, there is just weak

connection in the German language between "Epicurean" and food, perhaps this is also a root why English interpreters might dislike the term pleasure.

Generally speaking, in German literature Epicurus is understood as a wise man who taught how to live a joyful life, focussing on the "little" but important aspects while skipping disturbance.

I agree with you that the "absence of pain" might has something to do with other philosophies. Today, Stoicism, Buddhism, even the monotheistic religions are marketed as something that can reduce stress and leads to less pain in life.

There is also the point of "reducing pain" being more doctrinally neutral than "promoting pleasure". Declaring pleasure as an end in itself is like appreciating Epicurus and his philosophy way to much, elevating him to a saint.

It sounds very stark, but perhaps people sometimes deliberately misread Epicurean philosophy or study it just as being worth a superficial reading. A wide range of authors e.g. Karl Popper, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus relate to some Epicurean content just to conclude that their own thought is of bigger importance. Okay, this is how egos and new traditions of thought are formed. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2026 at 8:32 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

Maybe this discussion about "absence of pain" is an "English" thing.

I don't know that it is limited to England by any means, but I'd say that England seems to produce the highest concentration of it. Further, it goes deeper than the "stiff upper lip" and "keep calm and carry on" style of Stoicism that became identified with England in WW2. My own ethnic ancestry is English and I'd love to be able to pin this down more thoroughly. I see it as a major problem to be fixed rather than a strength to be cultivated.

Post by “Titus” of May 20, 2026 at 8:45 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't know that it is limited to England by any means



I meant an "English speaker" thing. Sometimes the interpretation of topics is related to the use of a language, which influences their interpretations. I corrected my original post to "English speaker thing".

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 20, 2026 at 9:31 AM

Be on the look out for AI-generated material, guys.

Those of us who used to be graphic designers and authors have lost our agency.

Post by “Todd” of May 20, 2026 at 12:24 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't know that it is limited to England by any means, but I'd say that England seems to produce the highest concentration of it.

I wasn't aware of that, but if true, I would say it is an example of a more general phenomenon that is not specific to scholars of Epicurus.

Ever since the vernacular languages displaced Latin as a common language for intellectuals, there have been numerous instances of significant ideas developed on the continent that the English-speaking world was oblivious to.

That obliviousness often lasted for decades, and by the time the English-speakers became aware, their own thinking had progressed in different directions, making the ideas of the continental thinkers seem, well, foreign, and maybe threatening.

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2026 at 9:30 AM

Those who are following the "Untroubled" blog on Substack will see that Jack Gedney has updated his comments on whether Epicurean philosophy is primarily about absence of pain. He has reworded his title to focus on Epicurus "emphasizing "reduction of pain," which is somewhat better than "primarily" but not by a lot. In fact he says:

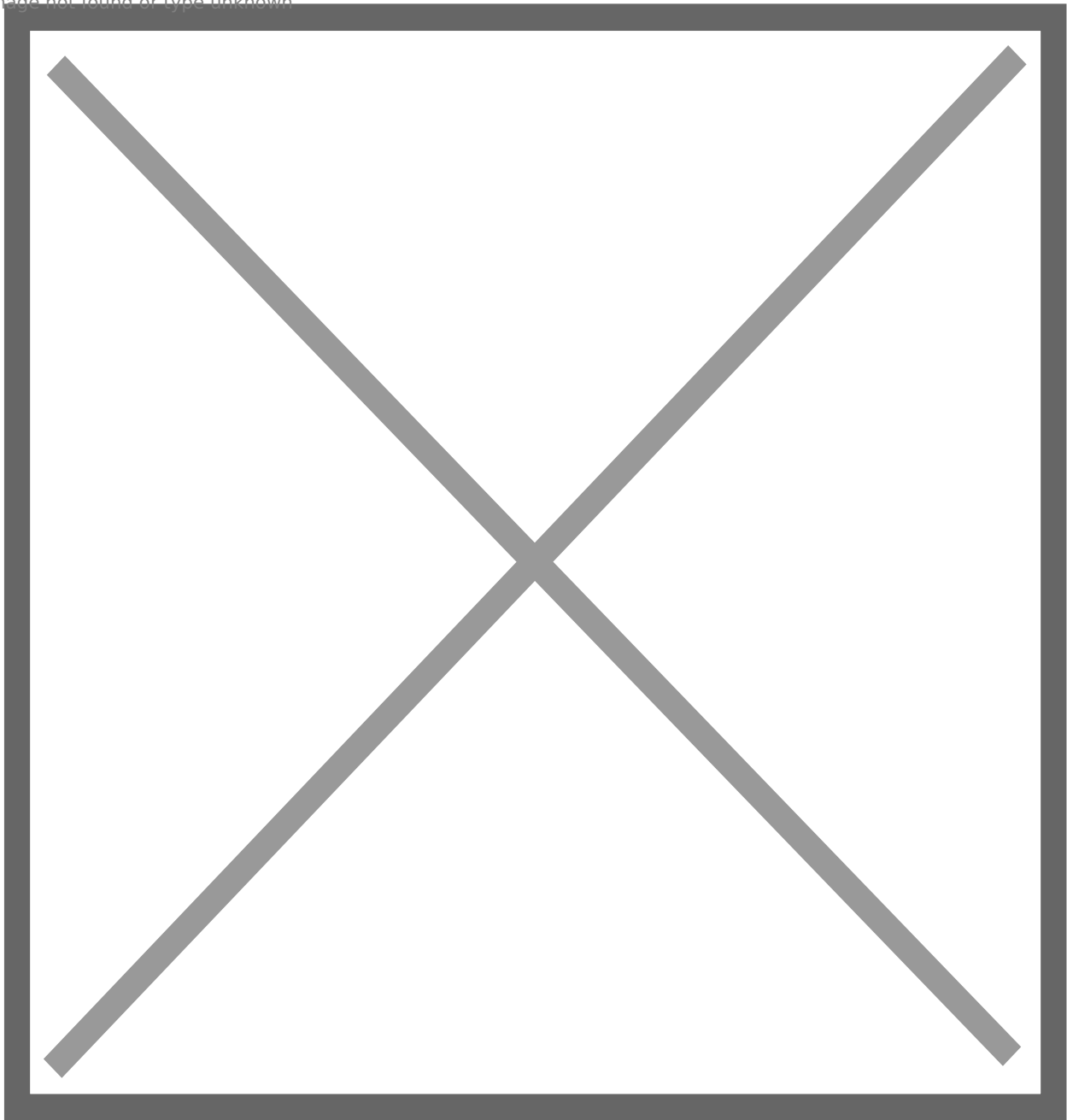
Quote

There are other topics than pain reduction in the whole *philosophy*, and "reduction" is more precise than "absence"—the overall emphasis is on what can be done, not just an all-or-nothing insistence on achieving complete absence of pain. Overall, though, I think all variations of the "primarily" claim are worth considering and not dismissing out of hand.

I find that to be consistent with the primary tone of this article, which is largely a defense of his original position and a criticism of the response that I wrote on my own substack blog.

I'll have a lot more to say about this but in the meantime thought I would post this to update this thread. I expect that there will be a lot of things to say by many people, and this thread is likely to grow lengthy, but it's probably best for someone who wants to understand all the issues to have the entire discussion in one place rather than spreading it out over multiple threads. I'll probably reword the thread title to reflect that too.

Image not found or type unknown



[Did Epicurus Emphasize the Reduction of Pain? Of Course!](#)

Frank debate is a good way to the truth

www.untroubled.blog

Post by “wbernys” of May 29, 2026 at 12:28 PM

I tend to be much more sympathetic more to Jack Gedney than [Cassius](#) in this question so my thoughts on both.

Criticism of Jack Gedney

His dismissal of Torquatus on "vivid pleasures" is rather "bleh" he merely says that Cicero is slandering Epicureans, which I think is extremely ad hoc.

Quote

Both are from Cicero, who, as Cassius points out, is a hostile critic rather than a sympathetic Epicurean. As I would interpret that fact, that suggests that he is more likely to distort or misunderstand the teaching. If Cicero is the most explicit voice one can find describing Epicureanism as advocating "a life crammed with pleasures," you should be suspicious.

I for one consider the speech of Torquatus to be wholly epicurean and regularly call back to it!

So to call the part on "vivid pleasures" a distortion because you disagree with it but accept other parts, like Torquatus talking about the absence of pain, as genuinely epicurean seems like cherry picking to me, and it's clear Torquatus considers vivid pleasures as genuinely very good for us, and how the best life is pictured.

I also think his treatment of famous Epicurus quote on kinetic pleasures is a little odd.

Quote

What does Epicurus actually recommend in regard to food, sex, and aesthetic stimulation? Mostly prudential avoidance.

However, this seems too strong. I also strongly imagine that this is influenced by selection bias of ancient philosophers mainly quoting things which an ancient hedonist would not ordinarily say. This is evidently the reason for why Plutarch sometimes quotes Epicurus for example on saying that it is more pleasant to give than to receive and Marcus Aurelius holding up Epicurus as an example of pain not being so bad or Seneca quoting Epicurus extolling virtue.

Sure Epicurus wants us to avoid pain if we can find a healthier way to get the pleasure we want (such as having sex before or after dinner) or avoid pleasures outweighed by pains but I don't think him giving advice on how to avoid pain from certain activities means those activities are not actually good and desirable, and Epicurus is clear these kinetic pleasures are truly part of THE GOOD. Saying he can't imagine the good without these pleasures clearly indicate they have great value are are worth pursuing, so long as we do it within the hedonic calculus of going after pleasures that are not outweighed by pains and choosing pains that have more

pleasures.

Criticism of Cassius.

Quote

2. People who claim that the Letter to Menoeceus emphasizes the avoidance of pain are considering only "a single sentence torn from context."

This is just wrong in my view, and Jack is absolutely right to point out that it's a lot more than just the one sentence. This is his strongest point by far. It's several sentences and given the fact that the letter to Menoeceus is only supposed to be a short summary which mentions several other subjects, saying that the absence of pain is not important to me is like saying the classification desires, or views on the future, or all pain being short or manageable is not important or "just a single sentence" (about one to two sentences each) even though it has much more length than either of these.

Also Cassius has sometimes made the arguments that pain reduction is the incorrect emphasis because of joys like friendship or owning a pet, which has "inevitably ends in grief" but Jack is right to point out that these things also lead to removal of pain in their own right, such as feelings of loneliness or anxiety, this is explicitly what makes Friendship necessary for Epicurus, and Jack is right to point out that [PD40](#) seems to say grief is not inevitable, perhaps a natural missing of pleasure, but not really extreme grief.

I also think Jack is right when he says

Quote

Cassius is right in pointing out that PD 3 is not an isolated maxim, but part of an intentional series of [Principal Doctrines](#) 1-4 (abbreviated further in the tetrapharmakon). However, looking at this context only underlines the importance of pain reduction in Epicureanism: all four are about pain reduction in the broad sense I describe.

PD3 is meant to be read as an affirmation that pleasure, its limits understood by reason, can serve as a guide, and that guide seems to be "don't chase after higher and higher pleasures of more stimulation, pleasure reaches its height in pain removal, calmness and healthiness is as good as sex or fine food". So don't accept those supposedly higher pleasures which have greater pains than they are worth.

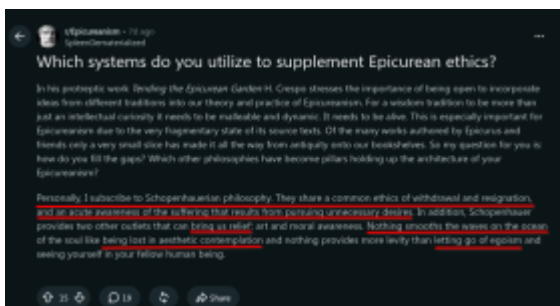
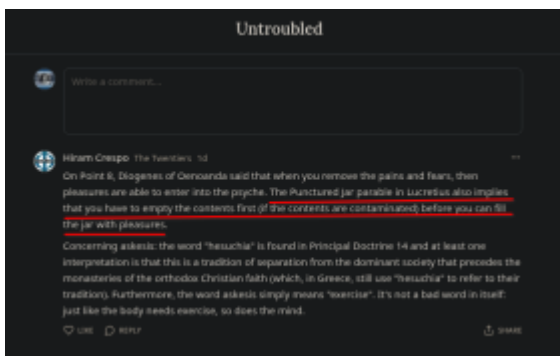
Quote

10. The “absence of pain” reading arose from Stoic, religious, and Humanist filters, rather than an objective look at the original Epicurean texts.

Heavily agree with Jack's criticism of this in the blog! I certainly consider this emphasis on absence of pain as purely Epicurean and don't interject other ideas, In fact I tried to do away with other ideas that I had earlier such as Epicurus being a "virtue ethicist" from a previous thread. and I dislike this sort of behavior of seeing any disagreement as a "corruption". I certainly don't think you intentionally do this Cassius but sometimes you come close and I hope we all know that we are fellow hogs of Epicurus and not "corrupters".

Post by “Cassius” of May 30, 2026 at 11:15 AM

I'm working on a long-form article which will be ready in a couple of days. In the meantime I'm watching and thinking and thought I would drop these two comments from elsewhere into the mix:



This last one reminds me of Cicero saying something to the effect that he was going to start his review of the various positions in On Ends because it is the easiest to understand.



Post by “Cassius” of May 30, 2026 at 12:51 PM

Query: Does it make sense for a normal person to "empty the contents first" if there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain? Is emptying even possible or desirable?

Post by “Godfrey” of May 30, 2026 at 1:13 PM

What this point immediately brings up is that the fluid added to the vessel will just mix with the fluid already there, which does make sense. This would allow for a mixture of pleasure and pain in the analogy. One answer to this is to use two different fluids such as oil and water, with the one being added always the opposite of the one in the vessel. In this case the two would be unmixed, while the vessel would contain differing amounts (analogous to *intensity*), and each fluid would be in a different *location*.

Another approach is to keep the existing model but emphasize that what the vessel contains is air and water, and be clear that one represents pleasure and the other pain. The problem with this is that air extends continuously from within the vessel into the entire atmosphere; that might imply something other than what's intended to some people. But then one might also say that water vapor also extends continuously from the bottle, which leads to quite the rabbit hole.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 30, 2026 at 1:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Query: Does it make sense for a normal person to "empty the contents first" if there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain? Is emptying even possible or desirable?

Here is the passage from Ferguson-Smith:

"Then he realized that the cause of the flaw was the vessel itself, which by its own flaw corrupted within it all things, even good things, that entered it from without. He became convinced of this, partly because [20] he saw that the vessel was leaky and riddled, so that it could never possibly be filled, and partly because he observed that it contaminated with a foul flavor everything it had taken in."

In footnotes, MFS says that the vessel is a metaphor for the mind, and that the leaky vessel is a metaphor for the mind that cannot be satisfied.

In an old thread on this ([The Vessel Analogy At The Opening of Lucretius Book Six](#)) , [Don](#) said: "So it all comes back around to our recent thread on ataraxia and the work of removing fear, anxiety, the darkness and torments of the mind, and instead freeing our minds from the "gloomy sea of troubles" so we can float on the calm ocean of ataraxia and surf the waves of delightful kinetic pleasures!"

So (it seems to me), "emptying" would be limited to those "torments" (e.g. fear of the gods) via application of Epicurean philosophy - and not some Buddhistic "empty mind."

As [Don](#) says later in the thread: "The image of cleaning and repairing the vessel as a metaphor for learning and internalizing the teachings of Epicurus with the resulting clean pot filled with clean liquid symbolizing the calm waters of ataraxia shows that ataraxia is not a sudden epiphany. It takes work to achieve and maybe even maintain."

Post by "Cassius" of May 30, 2026 at 1:50 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

So (it seems to me), "emptying" would be limited to those "torments" (e.g. fear of the gods) via application of Epicurean philosophy - and not some Buddhistic "empty mind."

And in fact, there is no way to "empty" the vessel, short of death - because removing any amount of pain can only be done by replacing it with pleasure, as those are the only two alternatives.

Post by “Cassius” of May 30, 2026 at 4:22 PM

While I was writing on this topic and also thinking about what we are discussing in the podcast, I came across a Substack post by Doug Bates entitled "[The Symbol Of What's Wrong With Stoicism](#)" which is critical of Zeno's hand gesture explanation of knowledge as reported by Cicero. This is something that Joshua specifically criticized in our recent podcasts as well.

I found the article a little puzzling however, because it didn't focus on the purpose of the hand gesture as essential to the issue of knowledge, but rather discussed it in terms of "openness" which became the focus of the article (*Put another way, the open hand is openness to all of experience. The partially closed hand is a curating of that experience: this part to focus on; that part to ignore. The fist is that which one is certain one wants to hold onto, and the left hand over the fist is the certainty of the certainty.....*)

I seem to recall that Doug Bates has written in the past more favorably of Stoicism, but maybe my memory is wrong. His blog is now subtitled *Articles about the intersection of ancient Greek philosophy and Buddhism; and in particular, the philosophy that resulted from that intersection: Pyrrhonism.*

Ok, so as skeptic I wouldn't expect him to speak favorably of Stoic ideas of knowledge, but I sort of expected him to track the arguments of Cicero, also a skeptic, rather than Pyrrho.

All that's a long way of saying that this reminded me that there IS an active group of modern Stoics for whom I do have significant respect (not agreement, but respect) - those like Christ Fischer who write at [TraditionalStoicism.com](#). They refuse to limit themselves to a narrow slice of Stoic philosophy and they insist on studying and pursuing the full spectrum of stoic ideas - physics, epistemology, *and* ethics.

Their statements in their ABOUT page could have been written to describe the purpose of the founding of EpicureanFriends.com, just by substituting "Epicurean" for "Stoic," and appropriately replacing the names dropped at the end:

Quote

About the Traditional Stoicism website

While this website and blog are the creation of Chris Fisher, the inspiration and encouragement came from a group of like-minded traditional Stoics from The Society of Epictetus. Traditional Stoics are not as numerous as modern Stoics on social media sites. As a result, our voice is often lost amidst numerous atheists and agnostics who place the divine and providential cosmos of Stoicism somewhere on the spectrum between “unnecessary” and “unreasonable.” Traditional Stoics consider the physics and theology of Stoicism an essential part of this philosophical way of life. Why?

Because the ancient Stoics said it was essential and we have found that to be true in our individual practice. We believe this deeply spiritual, philosophical way of life is a legitimate option for many moderns seeking a rational form of spirituality that is not tied to organized religion. This website and the [Traditional Stoicism Facebook group](#) will provide resources to support traditional Stoics in their practice, and allow interested individuals to explore the traditional form of Stoicism for themselves. While many may find one of the recently formulated modern versions of Stoicism more to their liking, traditional Stoics attempt to follow, as much as possible, the same path toward excellence and happiness trod by Roman Senator, Seneca; freed slave turned philosopher, Epictetus; and Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

The same goes for their "What Is Traditional Stoicism?" which could have been written for EpicureanFriends:

Quote

What is Traditional Stoicism?

These posts differentiate traditional Stoicism from the various modern iterations that diverge, often dramatically, from the essential elements of Stoic philosophy as historically understood. The assertion of traditional Stoicism is not that the philosophical system cannot change and evolve, nor does it assert that moderns must assent to everything the ancients did. Instead, traditional Stoicism rests on the demonstrable fact that the ancient Stoics built their philosophical theory and practice around a set of fundamental assumptions about the nature of humankind and the nature of the cosmos. Those assumptions define Stoicism and empower its practice to affect change in lives. Clearly, our understanding of both human nature and the cosmos has increased over time and those new facts can be assimilated into the framework of the original system. However, in our current secular age, many want to abandon fundamental aspects of the framework itself because they conflict with their assumed worldview. The ancient Stoics denied that their system could be changed in this manner; traditional Stoics agree. Traditional Stoicism asserts that we must avoid the impulse to change Stoic practice into something which is no longer recognizable as Stoicism simply to make it more palatable for moderns.

EpicureanFriends goes by "*Classical* Epicurean" rather than "Traditional Epicurean," but the point is the same. In the case of the Stoics you probably don't have to go back too many centuries or even decades to find the majority of self-proclaimed stoics to be exactly in line with classical stoic views, with the only required tweak being the name of gods being referenced.

In the case of Epicureans, I'd maintain you have to go all the way back to the classical period to find advocates for Epicurus whom the ancient Epicureans themselves would truly recognize as being part of their own school.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 31, 2026 at 12:29 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In the case of Epicureans, I'd maintain you have to go all the way back to the classical period to find advocates for Epicurus whom the ancient Epicureans themselves would truly recognize as being part of their own school.

Just for my own edification, when (or with whom) does the classical period end? (No argument with your point.)

Post by “Cassius” of May 31, 2026 at 1:47 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Just for my own edification, when (or with whom) does the classical period end? (No argument with your point.)

I gather that when we start talking about the "latest" old-school Epicureans who would have access to authentic texts and teachers we are probably talking about Lucian or Diogene of Oinoanda or Diogenes Laertius. I gather that their dates are approximate so I'm not sure which order to place them in.

After that period, it would appear to me that the continuity of the school was completely broken in terms of living teachers and readily available texts. Everyone after that general period would likely have been doing what we are doing - trying to reconstruct the full picture from relatively sparse remaining texts.

As time went by and fewer and fewer texts and teachers remained it would have become more and more tempting to narrow the focus onto the main surviving ethical texts and lose the context in which they were originally written.

Which eventually resulted in the modern phenomena of people who think that they can grasp all they need to know about Epicurus from the four short sentences of the Tetracharmakon,

which does not even *mention* pleasure or physics or canonics.