

Illustrations and Analogies For Explaining the "Two And Only Two Feelings" Argument

Post by "Cassius" of May 20, 2026 at 5:24 PM

My attention today got diverted over to the "Absence of Pain" Substack article, but when I started the day my focus was elsewhere. Initially, I was trying to come up with better and clearer ways to describe the principle that when you have a universe of two options, the absence of one is the presence of the other. That is something that needs to "click" in peoples' minds before they truly begin to understand how the terms "pleasure" and "absence of pain" can be interchangeable.

I have a draft of an article oriented toward that topic prepared, but I am not nearly 100% satisfied with it. This is one that would definitely improve with some feedback that would help reorder, add, or subtract from the illustrations that are in the list already. I've started with illustrations that can be found directly in the ancient texts, and added a few modern illustrations, but I feel sure there are others that have not yet been included, potentially even some better than any that are included here.

Before I consider publishing a version of this on Substack or even as a blog article here, I'd appreciate feedback on these illustrations / analogies from anyone so inclined. Does each one work fairly well? Others you can think of as better? Comment on which among each section are the most impactful.

As always, thanks very much.

Two and Only Two: Illustrations of the Epicurean Binary of Pleasure and Pain

Epicurus makes a claim that is both simple and radical: there are exactly two feelings, pleasure and pain, and nothing else. Every sentient experience falls into one category or the other. There is no neutral third state that is neither pleasant nor painful, no middle ground where sensation has somehow opted out of the binary.

This claim carries an immediate consequence that critics of Epicurus have resisted for two thousand years: **the absence of pain is not a neutral condition — it is pleasure.** Not a pale or diminished pleasure, not a placeholder waiting for "real" pleasure to arrive, but pleasure

fully and actually present. When pain is gone, what remains is not a void. What remains is the other of the only two things there are.

The argument is logical, but logic alone rarely produces conviction. What makes an argument land — what makes it felt rather than merely followed — is an image that shows the same truth in a form the eye and the body can recognize immediately. Epicurus and Lucretius knew this. They built their philosophy on illustrations, not just propositions.

What follows is a collection of those illustrations, beginning with the ones the Epicureans themselves used and moving to examples from the modern world. But first, the underlying principle deserves to be stated clearly on its own, because it is a principle that runs through the whole of Epicurean thought — not just its ethics.

The Principle: When Two Covers Everything

The logical structure at work here has a precise form. Two categories are **jointly exhaustive** when together they cover every possible case — when nothing falls outside them. They are **mutually exclusive** when nothing can belong to both at once. When a pair of categories is both jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive, a single consequence follows that cannot be argued around: **the absence of one is, by definition, the presence of the other.** Not probably. Not in most cases. Necessarily, always, without exception.

Pleasure and pain, as Epicurus defines them, form exactly such a pair. They cover every possible state of sentient experience — nothing falls outside them — and no experience can be both pleasant and painful in the same respect at the same time. This means that the moment pain is absent, pleasure is not merely likely or approaching or about to arrive. It IS present. The two conditions share a single boundary, and crossing that boundary in either direction is instantaneous and total.

This is not an empirical observation that could in principle have turned out otherwise. Epicurus is not reporting that he surveyed human feelings and found them to sort neatly into two groups. He is establishing a definition: these two categories, so defined, leave no remainder. The neutral middle ground that critics of Epicurus want to insert between pleasure and pain is not a discovery — it is a refusal to accept the definition. The person who insists on a neutral third feeling is in the same position as someone who insists there must be a third verdict besides guilty and not guilty, or a third position for a light switch besides on and off. The vocabulary for such a verdict exists; the reality it would name does not.

This same logical structure — two categories, jointly exhaustive, mutually exclusive, leaving no third option — is the foundation of Epicurean physics as well as Epicurean ethics. Everything in the universe is either body (that which can touch and be touched, that which impacts and

receives impact) or void (intangible space, offering no resistance). Epicurus makes the identical move in both domains. He is not borrowing a physics analogy to illuminate ethics. He is applying one method consistently across everything. When you understand how the binary works in physics, you understand how it works in ethics — because it is the same logical instrument.

The illustrations below make this visible rather than just arguable. Each one shows, in a domain where the principle is already obvious to everyone, the same structure that Epicurus claims for feeling: two conditions, one boundary, no middle ground, the absence of one being the immediate and total presence of the other.

Part One: Illustrations from the Epicurean Texts

Bodies and Space — The Foundational Binary

The single most powerful illustration available is not borrowed from another domain. It is the foundation of Epicurean physics itself.

In the *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus begins his account of the universe with a stark declaration: everything that exists is either body or void. Not atoms, specifically — body. That which is. And the defining characteristic of body is precisely its capacity to act on other things and to be acted upon: to push and be pushed, to touch and be touched, to impact and receive impact. Void — which Epicurus calls *ἀναφής φύσις*, “intangible nature” — is defined as its perfect opposite: that which offers no resistance, which cannot touch or be touched, through which everything passes without contact.

Lucretius develops this into a closed logical argument in *De Rerum Natura* Book I. Suppose someone proposes a third kind of existence alongside bodies and space. Lucretius’s answer is immediate: ask one question about this proposed third thing. Can it touch or be touched? Can it impact or receive impact? If yes — it is body. If no — it is void. There is no further category in which a third answer could be housed. The two definitions are jointly exhaustive. Any proposed third existence collapses back into one of the two the moment you press it.

This is the identical logical structure Epicurus applies to feelings. Propose a neutral state between pleasure and pain. Ask one question: is it painful? If yes — it is pain. If no — it is pleasure. Not the approach toward pleasure, not a neutral non-pain state waiting for something further to arrive, but pleasure present and actual. There is no room left for a third answer. Epicurus is not borrowing a convenient analogy from his physics. He is applying the same method, making the same move, closing the same logical door.

Before laying out the physics of bodies and space, Epicurus opens the *Letter to Herodotus* with a methodological instruction that applies with equal force to his account of feeling. We must, he says, “seize firmly the things that underlie our words” — the primary concept that each term points to must be clearly fixed — “else we shall leave everything undetermined as we dispute to infinity, or else we shall be using empty words.” This is not merely a logical caution. It is a precise diagnosis of what goes wrong in every dispute about pleasure that has run for two thousand years without resolution. The person who has never fixed a clear first concept of what pleasure IS cannot recognize it when it is present, cannot identify its arrival, cannot distinguish having it from lacking it. They will dispute to infinity about whether the Epicurean state of pain-freedom counts as pleasure — because “pleasure” remains an empty word for them, pointing at nothing definite. The binary is Epicurus’s instrument for ending that dispute by supplying the fixed reference point: pleasure is what is present when pain is absent. Once that concept is clear, the word points to something that can actually be recognized — and will be recognized, as a matter of course, by anyone who has stopped disputing long enough to look.

The direction of the question matters. Pain is the more immediately recognizable of the two states — when acute pain is present, no one fails to notice it. Pleasure, as Epicurus defines it, is broader and in many of its forms quieter: the pleasures of memory, of friendship, of philosophical conversation, of a body simply functioning without disturbance. These are real and fully present, but they are easy to overlook because they are not dramatic.

The therapeutic point of the binary is therefore corrective in a specific way. It is not an argument for complacency or low expectations — Epicurus himself maintained an extensive circle of friends, wrote and taught without ceasing, took active pleasure in food and conversation and philosophy, and encouraged everyone around him to do the same. The correction is not “stop seeking.” It is “seek from the right foundation, and recognize what you already have so that you can build on it intelligently.” The person who cannot recognize pleasure when pain is absent keeps seeking desperately and anxiously, driven by the false conviction that they have not yet arrived — and so misses both what is already present and the direction in which genuine additional pleasure lies. The person who correctly reads the binary can pursue friendship, philosophy, and the fuller pleasures of an engaged life from a position of clarity rather than chronic restlessness. Epicurus’s argument runs in the corrective direction: begin from what everyone recognizes (pain), establish that its absence is not a neutral waiting-room for something further, and from that correct foundation pursue pleasure actively and without confusion about what it is.

The image this produces is elemental: a particle of matter against empty space. Something, and the absence of something. Two conditions, one universe.

The Relay Torch — Fire or Cold Ash

In *De Rerum Natura* Book II, Lucretius describes the succession of generations as runners in a relay race passing the torch of life: “*et quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt*” — “and like runners they pass on the torch of life.”

The image carries its own argument. The torch is either burning or it is not. There is no third condition for a torch: not “somewhat alight,” not “pre-ignited,” not “cooling toward neither state.” The flame either lives in the wood or it does not. The moment it goes out, what remains is not a transitional state — it is cold, dark, inert matter. Fire and its absence are the two conditions, and they leave no gap between them.

What Lucretius uses for life and death, the same logic covers pleasure and pain. Either the warmth of pleasure is present or it is not. If it is not, what remains is not an intermediate — it is the cold state, which has its own name.

The Storm and the Shore — Safety or Peril

De Rerum Natura opens Book II with one of the most famous images in Latin poetry: the man standing safely on shore watching a great storm at sea. “*Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*” — “Sweet it is, when the great sea is troubled by winds, to watch from land another’s great toil.”

The image is explicitly about pleasure and its opposite. The man on the shore is safe; the sailors are in danger. These are not points on a spectrum. You are either in the storm or you are not. You are either battered by waves and wind or you are standing on solid ground watching. The coastline is an absolute boundary — cross it in one direction and you are in the sea; step back and you are not. There is no zone between the two that is neither shore nor storm.

Lucretius uses this as a picture of the contrast between the Epicurean life and the life of those without philosophy. The man who has secured the foundations of his understanding stands on the shore. Everyone else is in the water. The image does not allow for a middle position.

The Full Vessel — Complete or Not Complete

In the opening of Book VI of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius describes a life whose cup is already full — the man who has reached the limit, who has attained what pleasure is capable of

delivering, and for whom additional accumulation adds nothing because the vessel is already filled to the brim.

The image of the full vessel is not merely decorative. It makes a specific argument about limits: a cup that is full is fully full. There is no gradation between “full” and “fully full.” The filled state IS the complete state. When you pour into a full cup, the liquid does not gradually become “more full than full” — it spills, because the condition of fullness has already been reached and is already total.

This applies directly to the binary of pleasure and pain. The removal of pain does not produce a half-state that is “not quite pleasure yet.” When the cup of pain is emptied, the cup of pleasure is full. The limit has been reached. Fullness is not an approach toward something further — it is the thing itself, arrived.

Health and Sickness — The Medical Binary

Epicurus explicitly compared philosophy to medicine and its practitioners to physicians. This was not a casual metaphor. He meant that the philosopher, like the physician, deals with a condition that is either present or absent — and that the goal of the art is to move the patient from one state to the other.

A physician examining a patient recognizes exactly two conditions: the body is either functioning as it should, or it is not. There is no clinical state called “neither healthy nor sick.” Such a state has no medical meaning. Either the infection is present or it has cleared. Either the fever is there or it is gone. When sickness is absent, health IS present — not as a separate subsequent achievement but as the immediate condition of its absence.

The Epicurean applies the same diagnosis to the whole of life. Either the pain of fear, anxiety, or bodily suffering is present, or it is not. When it is not, pleasure is present — because those are the only two things a feeling can be.

Sleep and Waking — Experience or Its Absence

Lucretius returns repeatedly to the analogy between death and dreamless sleep. The argument about death — that we need not fear it because it is simply the absence of experience — depends on the same binary. Either you are awake and experiencing, or you are in dreamless sleep and experiencing nothing. These are the two states of consciousness, and they leave no

room for a third kind of being-conscious-but-not-experiencing.

The same binary holds for the sentient life more broadly. Either sensation is occurring or it is not. Either pleasure or pain is present, or sensation itself is absent — which for a living, functioning body means we have crossed from the question of what we feel into the question of whether we feel at all.

Part Two: Modern Illustrations

The ancient examples carry the greatest authority because they are Epicurus's own instruments. But the same binary appears wherever nature or human technology has produced a condition that genuinely admits of no third state. The following examples work because they are real, not because they have been constructed to illustrate a point.

The Cardiac Monitor — Wave or Flatline

A cardiac monitor displays exactly two conditions: the undulating wave of a living heartbeat, and the flat line that replaces it when the heart stops. Every person who has ever been in a hospital or watched a film knows both images and knows their meaning immediately.

The flatline is not neutral. It is not the absence of a condition while awaiting a verdict. It is a fully real, fully specific state with a name and a consequence. When the wave returns, life IS present. When it does not, death IS present. No third line exists on the monitor — not because the engineers were insufficiently creative, but because nature has provided exactly two conditions to display.

This is the most immediately visceral modern image for the Epicurean binary. The wave is pleasure; the flatline is the other thing.

The Earth from Orbit — Day Side and Night Side

A photograph of Earth from space shows the terminator — the line that divides the sunlit half from the half in shadow. On one side of that line, every surface is in full daylight. On the other side, every surface is in full darkness. The line between them is the sharpest natural boundary

visible from space.

Darkness is not nothing. It is not the absence of a condition while a third option is considered. It is a fully real state that exists on every surface the sun does not reach. When light arrives, darkness does not diminish toward a neutral middle — it is gone, instantly and completely, and light IS there.

The Pregnant and the Not-Pregnant

A phrase that already exists in common speech precisely because the logic is already obvious: you cannot be a little pregnant. Either the biological process has begun or it has not. There is no state of “not-pregnant but also not-not-pregnant” that one occupies while the question is pending. The moment the condition is present, it IS present — entirely, not gradually, not partially.

This example works because it is already culturally established as the canonical illustration of a true binary, recognized by anyone who has heard it.

The Verdict — Guilty or Not Guilty

A jury returns exactly one of two verdicts: guilty, or not guilty. The court does not recognize a verdict of “neither convicted nor acquitted.” Such a verdict would have no legal meaning — and more importantly, it would have no logical meaning, because the verdict is defined as the answer to a yes-or-no question. The defendant either committed the act or did not. The jury either finds this established or does not.

“Not guilty” is not a neutral outcome. It is a full verdict with full legal force and full consequences. It IS a decision, not the absence of one.

The court of sensation works identically. Either the experience is pleasant or it is not. “Not painful” is not a hung jury. It is a verdict: pleasure.

The Relay Torch — Ancient Image, Permanent Truth

The image Lucretius gave us belongs equally in this section, because it requires no historical knowledge to understand. A burning torch and a cold, dark torch: two objects, one condition present in one and absent in the other. No one needs to be told which is which. The eye reads the binary before the mind processes it.

The Logical Form — Argument Without Image

Two further examples work at the level of pure logic rather than picture, and are worth noting for that reason even though they do not reduce to a visual image.

True and false — every proposition is either true or false. There is no third truth-value called “neither true nor false.” This is the law of the excluded middle, and it applies directly: the proposition “I am experiencing pleasure” is either true or false. If false, its negation — “I am not experiencing pleasure” — is true. And “not experiencing pleasure” in a sentient being is the definition of experiencing pain.

Binary computing and the telegraph — at the physical level, every bit in a computer and every moment of a telegraph signal is either current-flowing or current-not-flowing. The entire digital world — every image, every text, every calculation — is built on a binary that has no middle position. A transistor gate is either conducting or it is not. A telegraph line is either carrying signal or it is carrying silence. These illustrate the principle with great logical clarity but do not reduce to a picture, and they require the audience to understand the underlying technology before the analogy can land.

The Common Structure

Every illustration in both lists shares the same structure:

1. There are exactly two conditions.
2. They are defined by each other — one is the presence of what the other lacks.
3. A third condition cannot be inserted between them because there is no logical space for it to occupy.
4. The moment one condition ends, the other IS present — not approaching, not about to become, but present.

This is what Epicurus means when he says pleasure and pain are the two feelings. He is not reporting an observation that could in principle have turned out otherwise. He is defining the terms in a way that closes the door on any third option by construction — the same way he

closed the door on a third kind of existence between bodies and space.

The person who insists on a neutral middle ground between pleasure and pain is in the position of someone who insists there must be a third verdict besides guilty and not guilty, or a third state for a torch besides burning and not burning. A name can be invented for such a state — but naming is not finding. The test is not whether a word can be coined but whether the thing named can be located in actual felt experience. Anyone who proposes a neutral third feeling must eventually describe what it is like to be in it; and when they do, every description will draw on either pleasant or unpleasant qualities — because feeling itself is what the binary describes, and feeling's own report always comes back as one or the other. A neutral state that can be felt as neither pleasant nor unpleasant cannot be felt at all, which means it is not a feeling. This is precisely what Epicurus warned against at the opening of the *Letter to Herodotus*: words whose referents cannot be located in actual experience produce endless dispute without result. The invented vocabulary for a neutral third feeling is a perfect specimen of the empty word — a name pointing at nothing that can be distinguished from the two states that are already there. What exists, when pain is absent, is the other of the only two things there are — which is pleasure, present, real, and complete.

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2026 at 5:29 PM

On this one also: In case it's not obvious from the word "illustration," I am particularly interested in identifying word pictures that can be turned into actual pictures, so that we can "illustrate" the point graphically in pictures that are even more impactful than words.

That's the reason why the draft article has a separate "purely logical" section, as purely logical assertions don't necessarily lend themselves to pictures. Venn Diagrams perhaps, but not pictures of real things. I'm hoping that we can come up with some down-to-earth and actual "pictures" for use in the future.

Many of these examples are open to "but what about" objections, and that aspect is addressed in the article. I don't think that pictures like the earth / moon / a planet shown from space, with the zone of darkness and light starkly defined, are rendered unusable by the fact that if you're actually on the surface there's likely to be a dawn or dusk effect while the light diffuses in a particular area. The point is to drive home the "either/or" nature of the choice.

I've considered and rejected a lot of possibilities because of that problem, but I don't think there's actually a bright line between what's usable as an illustration and what's not. What we want is something that's immediately graspable to reinforce the logic of the issue, even if it's technically possible to quibble around the edges. But the most effective are likely to be those where it's actually or close to impossible to quibble.

Post by “Don” of May 20, 2026 at 6:04 PM

Hmmm... I'm not entirely onboard with some of your examples. I'll try to take a look over the next few days. I'd think you'd want to go down the path of oil and water.

Post by “Bryan” of May 20, 2026 at 6:11 PM

I always have in mind this quote of Metrodorus (from Plutarch in Non Posse 1091 A):

"This very thing is the good: escaping the bad - because it is not possible for the good to be placed anywhere, when nothing painful or distressing is further withdrawing."

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2026 at 6:49 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I'd think you'd want to go down the path of oil and water.

While oil and water don't mix, i doubt it is immediately clear that there is an obvious context in which those are the only two alternatives. Even if you're talking salad dressing there's probably spices and other things that i as a non-foodie don't even know about that people would try to include in the mix.

The best illustrations will have to combine both the points that (1) the two don't mix and (2) these two are the only two possibilities.

Post by “Todd” of May 20, 2026 at 6:50 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"pleasure" and "absence of pain" can be interchangeable

Are they though?

It seems more correct to say complete absence of pain is perfect / complete / the limit of / the fullness of pleasure.

Or you could say a reduction of pain is an increase of pleasure. Or a given sensation is either pleasant or painful.

But by treating those terms as equivalent you could easily give people the idea that you only experience pleasure if you are completely free from pain, which is obviously not what Epicurus said.

I think there is a technical sense in which they are interchangeable. The problem is that "absence" suggests *complete* absence, while "pleasure" by itself just suggests *some* pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2026 at 7:01 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

But by treating those terms as equivalent you could easily give people the idea that you only experience pleasure if you are completely free from pain, which is obviously not what Epicurus said.

That is the huge problem that requires that whenever this is discussed an explanation is given. From the point of view of "any individual moment or experience," as in PD3, any feeling is either pain or pleasure but not both or either mixed or both or either.

But you're obviously correct that this is not immediately obvious, because people can and do jump to the conclusion that it means a feeling of essentially nothingness. Some people in fact will try to argue that some kind of sensationless floating is truly the ideal state, but to me that is bogus and absurd and should be recognized as such.

I think the explanation for the letter to Menoecus is that Epicurus was writing to a student who could be expected to know the importance and implication of the "if you are alive you are experiencing one or the other" context that Torquatus argues to Cicero.

But clearly everyone today who does not have access to authoritative texts and teachers is highly likely not to know that or agree with that, and that's the source of the whole problem. It wouldn't have been a problem when lots of teachers and texts were around and anyone could easily find the explanation, but it's a huge problem now when you have very few sources explaining it, other than Torquatus, who almost no one takes the time to read in any level of detail.

So those terms "can" be interchangeable but as you observe, they aren't exactly the same set of letters in the same order, so they have to be explained in order for the point to be clear.

In the end I don't think there's a way around that, but to observe that there's no way around it is probably just to say what Epicurus and Lucretius stress over and over - that "philosophy" is necessary in order to live the happiest life possible.

Post by "Todd" of May 20, 2026 at 8:28 PM

The Full Vessel

This one doesn't make sense to me.

I've always liked this example, and I think it was useful to me when I was first learning about Epicurus.

My understanding of the cup model (which could be incorrect):

The cup represents us or our life at any given time. The liquid is pleasure. The unfilled volume is pain. The point is once the cup is full, all pain has been removed, and there is no more room to add pleasure.

This article seems to imply that the cup can only be full or empty - but why? A cup can obviously be partially full.

Maybe it's trying to make a different analogy, and I'm confused because I'm used to the usual one?

Post by "Todd" of May 20, 2026 at 9:23 PM

I was going to go through the some of the other examples, but I've realized that I just don't like this article at all.

I think it is just going to create more confusion rather than clarifying anything.

We can discuss this more if you want, but I won't pollute this thread with more negative feedback unless asked.

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2026 at 9:49 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

I was going to go through the some of the other examples, but I've realized that I just don't like this article at all.

It 's not easy to get comfortable with this approach because it's a difficult subject to get your arms around, but that's exactly why we have to get our arms around it.

it is going to strike most people as discretionary and debatable whether to divide things into binary classes in the first place. I can certainly see the objections. But that is clearly what Epicurus was doing. Why did he do that? Discussing these examples help get to the questions that have to be answered in order to understand why he was doing this and is the first step before applying it.

There are all sorts of gradations between light and dark depending on how these words are used and the circumstances you are talking about. Yet at the same time, it is also valuable to form individual circumstances into concepts, and then consider the concepts as discrete and mutually exclusive for purposes of being able to communicate and then apply the generalities as ideas.

That's why it's important to talk through these things.

If people who are sympathetic to Epicurus aren't comfortable with the approach - and I agree many of us/them aren't - then we can't expect others to get comfortable with it either. Yet this kind of categorization is exactly what Epicurus was doing in order to view things conceptually and construct a philosophy. And this kind of process is probably necessary in any philosophy that doesn't break down into absolute skepticism.

Epicurus is also asserting that a philosophy is exactly what is necessary in order to live happily and get the most out of life. There's no way to understand his expansion of the definition of pleasure without analyzing what he is saying philosophically. And I doubt we can do that without stepping through the analysis that for example David Sedley goes through in his "Inferential Basis of Epicurean Ethics."

it's not easy, and it won't make everyone comfortable (because people often prefer to avoid making decisions when they aren't backed into a corner to do so) but if it were easy there wouldn't be so much disagreement about philosophy in the first place.

Why use letters and form them into words? Why develop a language that's inevitably imprecise? Here's where I think we can say good things about mathematics, for example, because even though mathematics can't substitute for real things, mathematics helps us make all sorts of useful predictions about the way real things operate, so it is definitely useful so long as we keep in mind its limitations.

I doubt there's any better example of this than "pleasure" and "pain." There are literally innumerable examples of specific pleasures and specific pains, and they vary tremendously from each other. And yet it is still useful for us to speak conceptually about "pleasure" and "pain" as if there is some common element about them. And of course there is - we find pleasure agreeable and pain disagreeable. But those words "pleasure" and "pain" tell us absolutely nothing about the specific experience other than that we feel them to be desirable or undesirable.

If we don't talk philosophically and make this clear, we end up giving people the idea that the pleasure of cutting your fingernails is exactly the same experience as the pleasure of building a rocket ship to fly to the moon -- which is absurd.

Of course that's the road the Utilitarians tried to go down in finding ways to calculate things like the greatest good for the greatest number, but it simply can't be done because all people and all circumstances have unique aspects to them.

So we have to be able to both talk intelligently in generalities while still being absolutely clear that everything is constantly in motion and no two situations are truly exactly the same.

Post by "Todd" of May 20, 2026 at 10:35 PM

I will give this one try to explain my issue with this article.

Two different (but related) things are being mixed up here: the feelings, and the limit of pleasure.

The binary illustrations are great to explain that there are exactly 2 feelings.

When you add in the limit of pleasure, the AI is trying to describe that in terms of binaries too.

For example, in the cup model, the binary is what is in the cup - liquid or air, there is no third thing, and they are not mixed.

The *level* of the liquid in the cup is a continuum between the two limits. The AI does not seem to be getting that. It is implying that the level of the liquid is a binary too. That the cup is either full or empty.

That seems wrong to me. (This issue is pervasive throughout the article, it is not limited to the section on the full vessel.)

Post by “Don” of May 20, 2026 at 11:14 PM

So you're trying to illustrate:

There are only two things in the set.

There can ONLY be two things in the set.

One is the opposite of the other.

And so on.

That's a tall order.

I don't like trying to shoehorn the relay race into pain/pleasure analogies.

I also don't like the storm and shore for the pain/pleasure analogies.

I didn't like verdict, pregnant, or cardiac monitor either.

Day and night on Earth don't work either. At the liminal points you get phenomena like twilight and gloaming and dawn.

It seems to me you're trying way too hard.

To me, pleasure and pain are like oil and water. As water is poured in, oil rises and is eventually pushed out of the vessel .

Same analogy of adding sand to a bucket of water at the beach. Sand and water can't occupy the same space.

You are Sisyphus rolling a HUGE boulder uphill trying to come up with the perfect analogy. Don't let the perfect become the enemy of the good enough. You're trying to hit too many points with the same analogy. From my perspective, you're just muddying the waters and not providing any clarity to "There's only two feelings: pleasure and pain." Your methods are not working for me at least.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2026 at 7:37 AM

Lucretius Book One:

1-418

But now, to weave again at the web, which is the task of my discourse, all nature then, as it is of itself, is built of these two things: for there are bodies and the void, in which they are placed and where they move hither and thither. For that body exists is declared by the feeling which all share alike; and unless faith in this feeling be firmly grounded at once and prevail, there will be naught to which we can make appeal about things hidden, so as to prove aught by the reasoning of the mind. And next, were there not room and empty space, which we call void, nowhere could bodies be placed, nor could they wander at all hither and thither in any direction; and this I have above shown to you but a little while before.

1-430

Besides these there is nothing which you could say is parted from all body and sundered from void, which could be discovered, as it were a third nature in the list. For whatever shall exist, must needs be something in itself; and if it suffer touch, however small and light, it will increase the count of body by a bulk great or maybe small, if it exists at all, and be added to its sum. But if it is not to be touched, inasmuch as it cannot on any side check anything from wandering through it and passing on its way, in truth it will be that which we call empty void. Or again, whatsoever exists by itself, will either do something or suffer itself while other things act upon it, or it will be such that things may exist and go on in it. But nothing can do or suffer without body, nor afford room again, unless it be void and empty space. And so besides void and bodies no third nature by itself can be left in the list of things, which might either at any time fall within the purview of our senses, or be grasped by any one through reasoning of the mind.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2026 at 7:45 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

When you add in the limit of pleasure, the AI is trying to describe that in terms of binaries too.

Just to be clear here, if there is going to be a failure in the article for trying rather than succeeding to describe something in terms of binaries, the failure is going to be mine, not that of "the AI".

I've already gone through this wording several times before presenting this version here, and I agree with all of it. Now can some of it be made better? Certainly, that's the reason for the discussion. But the basic principal is exactly what is stated in the excerpt from Lucretius that I placed above.

As to the entire universe, Epicurus is dividing everything between bodies or space. The same issues and questions being raised about the binary process apply to that division as well --- but nevertheless that is the process that Epicurus (here through Lucretius) was following, and they are doing it for a reason.

Philosophy requires us to walk and chew gum at the same time. We have to consider the perspective from which we are looking at things and to realize that the perspective on the same things can shift and require new wording while still explaining the same phenomena.

"Pleasure" can be an immediate feeling in my thumb, or it can be the universal guide and goal of nature. The same for "happiness" - I can "feel happy" or I can consider "happy" to be a complex sum of all the experiences of life and mean totally different things for totally different people.

The issues are not "easy" to state but they can be made clearer than if we just ignore them and say "I like pleasure and I want to be happy" without any further attempt to explain what you mean.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2026 at 7:54 AM

The same process in the letter to Herodotus is below. This is not the argument of a technician listing out all the different observations that could be made of cats, dogs, trees, flowers, ad infinitum.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5097-illustrations-and-analogies-for-explaining-the-two-and-only-two-feelings-argumen/>

This is a logical high-level argument, based choosing to divide things according to what 'sense' reveals to us -- and we do this even though we ultimately conclude that these bodies are made of atoms, which the senses do NOT reveal to us directly.

The process of deducing the existence of atoms is a separate step, that follows this one, not the very same statement. But the logical step illustrated here is the starting point for the other, and if you don't accept the validity of this argument, you never get further, because you have to accept that it is valid to just what is perceptible before you can go to the next step of making claims about what is imperceptible.

Quote

Moreover, the universe is bodies and space: for that bodies exist, sense itself witnesses in the experience of all men, and in accordance with the evidence of sense we must of necessity judge of the imperceptible by reasoning, as I have already said.

[40] And if there were not that which we term void and place and intangible existence, bodies would have nowhere to exist and nothing through which to move, as they are seen to move. And besides these two, nothing can even be thought of either by conception or on the analogy of things conceivable such as could be grasped as whole existences and not spoken of as the accidents or properties of such existences.

Post by “Cassius” of May 21, 2026 at 8:01 AM

Couple of specific comments:

[Quote from Don](#)

So you're trying to illustrate:

There are only two things in the set.

There can ONLY be two things in the set.

One is the opposite of the other.

And so on.

That's a tall order.

Display More

I would say that's exactly what Epicurus and Lucretius are doing.

[Quote from Don](#)

I didn't like verdict, pregnant, or cardiac monitor either.

I'm pretty comfortable with the verdict aspect from my legal background, but I can see that those less familiar with US criminal law might not accept it so quickly. As to the cardiac monitor I can see how it works but it's obviously not an analogy Epicurus would have used.

As for pregnancy, all my life I have heard people say that "you can't be a little bit pregnant" as an illustration of pretty much precisely the point that it's "all or nothing" so I think that one clearly works, even though it's less than ideal.

In fact anything that illustrates an "all or nothing" principle is pretty clearly going to be relevant to the discussion.

Which leads to.....

Post by “Cassius” of May 21, 2026 at 8:04 AM

Here's another list culled from asking for "all or nothing" propositions:

Quote

People often recognize certain situations as “all or nothing” because they intuitively understand that partial fulfillment defeats the thing itself. The categories differ, but the underlying structure is: either the condition is met, or it is not.

Examples:

- **Being alive** — One is alive or dead. People do not ordinarily think of “partly alive” as a meaningful condition.
- **Pregnancy** — In everyday usage, someone is either pregnant or not pregnant. People often use this as a classic example of a binary condition.
- **Crossing a finish line** — Either you crossed it or you did not. Finishing “90% of a marathon” is still not completing it.

- **Passing a legal age threshold** — You are either 18, 21, etc., or you are not. A person one day short does not usually receive partial recognition.
- **Marriage status** — In law, one is generally married or unmarried. Emotional commitment can vary, but legal status is treated as binary.
- **A light switch being on or off** — At the practical level, people think in terms of “the light is on” or “the light is off,” even if electrical realities are more nuanced.
- **Winning a game with a specific condition** — In games like checkmate in chess, once the condition is met, the result is decisive.
- **A door being locked** — If a lock fails to engage, it is not considered “mostly locked.” Security often works in all-or-nothing terms.
- **Virginity or first occurrence events** — Many people think of “first time” events as categorical. Either it happened or it did not.
- **A password being correct** — One wrong character and access fails. Computer systems often operate on binary thresholds.
- **Passing through airport security with a boarding pass** — Either you are authorized and admitted, or you are not.
- **Signing a contract** — Until signed, the agreement is often treated as incomplete; after signing, it becomes operative.
- **Trust after a perceived betrayal** — In personal life people sometimes *treat* trust as all-or-nothing (“I trust him” / “I do not trust him”), even though trust in reality may exist in degrees.
- **Loyalty in war or politics** — People often frame allegiance as binary: either one is “with us” or “against us.”
- **Death in fiction and drama** — Characters often say things like “You cannot be a little dead,” precisely because people naturally recognize some categories as absolute.

Some of these are truly binary by definition; others are socially or psychologically treated as binary even though, upon closer analysis, they may admit degrees. That distinction itself is often philosophically important.

Post by “Cassius” of May 21, 2026 at 8:08 AM

Another aspect that is relevant to the discussion of comparing “happy” or “pleasure” as a comparative state to “happy” or “pleasure” as a superlative is the question of whether you can experience pleasure in one part of your experience while you are experiencing pain in another, or is your experience necessarily an “all-or-nothing” proposition.

We've debated that question a number of times on the forum but I think most of us have concluded that it IS possible to be experiencing pleasure in one part of our experience while pain in another. And most of us who have concluded that would cite Epicurus on his last day experiencing pain in his body (at least in his kidney area) while experiencing pleasure in his mind (brain).

So yes, it is necessary to distinguish in talking about pleasure whether you mean your whole experience is pleasure, or, as [PD03](#) would also imply, whether pleasure and pain are discrete in any part of your experience, but that you can be aware of different parts of your experience at the same time. That's exactly what Torquatus would seem to imply too when he said that the wise man always has "more reason for joy than for vexation" (implying that you have multiple reasons at once).

Even though at the same time Torquatus talks in terms of "if you are experiencing anything you are experiencing either pleasure or pain."

You have to look at pleasure/happiness both "in sum" as well as acknowledging its discrete binary relationship with pain/unhappiness.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2026 at 8:19 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't like trying to shoehorn the relay race into pain/pleasure analogies.

I also don't like the storm and shore for the pain/pleasure analogies.

So the storm and shore analogy seems to me to be an example of what is cited in the quote above about how "Some of these are truly binary by definition; others are socially or psychologically treated as binary even though, upon closer analysis, they may admit degrees. That distinction itself is often philosophically important."

while the "race" analogy is probably more clear - you either finish the race or you don't. Most of the time also you either "win" the race or you don't.

It's always possible to look for "what about" unusual situations that require nuance, but that doesn't take away from the fact that "usual" and "unusual" are also real things, and that it is reasonable to make generalizations about what is "usual."

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2026 at 8:44 AM

Last comment for now - the application of the atoms/void binary to pleasure/pain is what David Sedley discusses in his "Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics"

2 The physics-ethics analogy

Thanks to the survival of Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus*, and to Lucretius' expansion and supplementation of its arguments, it is possible to discern a clear argumentative structure in Epicurean physics, especially in its first, foundational moves.¹ My thesis will be that the foundations of Epicurean ethics had a closely analogous structure.

8 Epilogue

By now I have traced the parallelism of ethical and physical methodology through four distinct stages: (1) a primitive dyadic sketching-in of the territory; (2) conceptual amplification and defence of the sketch; (3) formal proof of its exhaustiveness; (4) elimination of further claimants to inclusion. Thereafter the parallelism can be followed, if at all, only in rather looser terms. In physics, body will now be refined into atomic chunks, followed *inter alia* by a detailed discussion of their range of shapes and sizes, and of their behaviour in compounds. In ethics, the next step will be the loosely analogous one of classifying individual pleasures and pains into the bodily and the mental, and examining their respective contributions as components in a good life.

File

["The Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics" - Article By David Sedley](#)

David Sedley compares Epicurus' arguments in favor of atomism in physics with his arguments in favor of pleasure as the focus of ethics.



Cassius

January 23, 2026 at 11:29 AM

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2026 at 11:22 AM

Ok all of the comments so far have been helpful and thanks to all who made them. This is not an easy or simple article, and it really helps if someone has first read the Sedley article. However to be useful that can't be mandatory - the article has to stand on its own. I have therefore revised it to contain more of the Sedley analysis of Epicurus' consistent binary approach.

Anyone who has the time and inclination to comment is welcome to do so. It's much easier to read over at [EpicurusToday](#) where there is a table of contents showing the sections, but below

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5097-illustrations-and-analogies-for-explaining-the-two-and-only-two-feelings-argumen/>

is the current version:

Quote

Two and Only Two: Illustrations of the Epicurean Binary of Pleasure and Pain

Epicurus makes a claim that is both simple and radical: there are exactly two feelings, pleasure and pain, and nothing else. Every sentient experience falls into one category or the other. There is no neutral third state that is neither pleasant nor painful, no middle ground where sensation has somehow opted out of the binary.

This claim carries an immediate consequence that critics of Epicurus have resisted for two thousand years: **the absence of pain is not a neutral condition — it is pleasure.** Not a pale or diminished pleasure, not a placeholder waiting for “real” pleasure to arrive, but pleasure fully and actually present. When pain is gone, what remains is not a void. What remains is the other of the only two things there are.

The argument is logical, but logic alone rarely produces conviction. What makes an argument land — what makes it felt rather than merely followed — is an image that shows the same truth in a form the eye and the body can recognize immediately. Epicurus and Lucretius knew this. They built their philosophy on illustrations, not just propositions.

What follows is a collection of those illustrations, beginning with the ones the Epicureans themselves used and moving to examples from the modern world. But before the illustrations, two things must be in place: the underlying logical principle, and the historical argument that the principle was designed to refute.

The arguments in this article are not simple, and they rely heavily on those of David Sedley in his article “The Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics,” published in *Ethics*, edited by Stephen Everson (Cambridge University Press), in the *Companions to Ancient Thought* series. Those who wish to explore these issues further are well advised to consult Dr. Sedley’s article directly, because the formulations presented here are based on, but not identical with, those of Dr. Sedley. Any errors or poor formulations in this article are attributable to Cassius Amicus, not to Dr. Sedley or other commentators referenced here.

The Principle: When Two Covers Everything

The logical structure at work here has a precise form. Two categories are **jointly exhaustive** when together they cover every possible case — when nothing falls

outside them. They are **mutually exclusive** when nothing can belong to both at once. When a pair of categories is both jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive, a single consequence follows that cannot be argued around: **the absence of one is, by definition, the presence of the other.** Not probably. Not in most cases. Necessarily, always, without exception.

Pleasure and pain, as Epicurus defines them, form exactly such a pair. They cover every possible state of sentient experience — nothing falls outside them — and no experience can be both pleasant and painful in the same respect at the same time. This means that the moment pain is absent, pleasure is not merely likely or approaching or about to arrive. It IS present. The two conditions share a single boundary, and crossing that boundary in either direction is instantaneous and total.

This is not an empirical observation that could in principle have turned out otherwise. Epicurus is not reporting that he surveyed human feelings and found them to sort neatly into two groups. He is establishing a definition: these two categories, so defined, leave no remainder. The neutral middle ground that critics of Epicurus want to insert between pleasure and pain is not a discovery — it is a refusal to accept the definition. The person who insists on a neutral third feeling is in the same position as someone who insists there must be a third verdict besides guilty and not guilty, or a third position for a light switch besides on and off. The vocabulary for such a verdict exists; the reality it would name does not.

This same logical structure — two categories, jointly exhaustive, mutually exclusive, leaving no third option — is the foundation of Epicurean physics as well as Epicurean ethics. Everything in the universe is either body (that which can touch and be touched, that which impacts and receives impact) or void (intangible space, offering no resistance). Epicurus makes the identical move in both domains. He is not borrowing a physics analogy to illuminate ethics. He is applying one method consistently across everything. When you understand how the binary works in physics, you understand how it works in ethics — because it is the same logical instrument.

One scope limitation must be stated plainly before proceeding, because the failure to state it produces a misreading so common it deserves to be headed off at the start. This argument operates at the level of philosophical concepts — it is a discussion of pleasure and pain as categories, not a prescription for how any individual should evaluate any individual experience. To say that every pleasant experience falls under the concept of pleasure, and that every painful experience falls under the concept of pain, says nothing about which pleasures are greater or lesser, longer or shorter, more or less worth pursuing in particular circumstances. The pleasure of sitting quietly in a garden and the pleasure of building a rocket and flying to the moon are both pleasures — both fall on the same side of the binary — but no one who has understood Epicurus

supposes he taught that these two experiences are equivalent in any other respect. Philosophy requires the capacity to speak in generalities — to reason about pleasure as a concept — while remaining clear that the concept is not a description of any individual experience, and does not reduce individual experiences to equivalence. Once the category is established and understood, the question of which specific pleasures to pursue, how to weigh them, and how to choose wisely among them is where the detailed work of Epicurean ethics begins. The binary establishes the territory. It does not flatten it.

The Historical Target — What Epicurus Was Arguing Against

Before examining the illustrations, it is worth asking: why did this argument need to be made at all? If the binary of pleasure and pain were obvious to everyone, Epicurus would not have spent the effort establishing and defending it. The reason he had to argue for it is that a rival philosophical school — one that shared his starting commitment to pleasure as the good — explicitly denied it.

The Cyrenaics, followers of Aristippus of Cyrene, were fellow hedonists. They agreed that pleasure was the goal of life. But they defined pleasure differently. For the Cyrenaics, pleasure consisted in smooth *kinēsis* — movement, stimulation, excitement, the pleasures of active sensation. Pain consisted in rough *kinēsis*. And the state that was neither — the unstimulated condition, the state of bodily contentment, the absence of both stimulation and disturbance — was for the Cyrenaics a third thing: neither pleasant nor painful, but neutral.

This was not an eccentric philosophical position. It was the natural first thought of anyone who reflects on pleasure and observes that eating a meal produces positive sensation, a headache produces pain, and sitting quietly between meals produces neither. The Cyrenaic position maps onto common experience in a way that makes it intuitively plausible. It is the position most people hold before they have been persuaded otherwise.

Epicurus's denial of the neutral state was therefore not a theoretical luxury — it was a direct rejection of a live philosophical alternative with enormous practical stakes. If the unstimulated state — simple being alive, freedom from anxiety, the condition of a body functioning without disturbance — were merely neutral, then the Cyrenaic's life of active sensory stimulation would be genuinely more pleasurable than the Epicurean's. The person who wants the best possible life would have to keep seeking stimulation, keep adding excitement, keep accumulating kinetic pleasures beyond the mere

removal of pain. On Cyrenaic terms, pain-freedom is only a base from which the real pleasures begin — it is not itself a pleasure.

The binary was the instrument by which Epicurus established that this is wrong: the simple life, free of pain, is not merely neutral. It is already fully pleasant. The Epicurean need not seek stimulation beyond the removal of pain in order to be enjoying the highest pleasure. The highest pleasure is the limit, and the limit is reached when pain is gone. As David Sedley observes in his study of the inferential foundations of Epicurean ethics, Epicurus “has no choice but to hold that once all pain has been removed one has already achieved a pleasant state, since he believes it to be in fact the pleasantest possible state. Therefore painlessness is pleasure — *katastematic* pleasure, as he calls it, to contrast it with kinetic pleasure.” The denial of the neutral third state is not only logically required by the binary; it is practically required by the entire Epicurean account of what constitutes a good life.

The Four-Stage Method — Physics and Ethics in Parallel

Epicurus did not simply assert the binary and leave it there. He followed a systematic method for establishing it, and the same method appears in both his physics and his ethics. Sedley traces four stages through which the Epicureans moved in each domain:

Stage one: Primitive binary (dyadic) sketching. Establish two fundamental categories as self-evident from perception or intuition. In physics: bodies and space. In ethics: pleasure and pain. At this stage the categories are maximally unrefined — their full content has not been specified, only the basic division marked out.

Stage two: Conceptual amplification and defence. Define each category more precisely. Body is defined as what can touch and be touched; space as intangible nature. Pleasure is defined as what all living creatures, from birth, naturally pursue; pain as what all naturally avoid. This is the Cradle Argument, visible in the behavior of any infant and uncorrupted by philosophical theories. As Torquatus reports in Cicero’s *On Ends*: “Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks pleasure and enjoys it as the chief good, while shunning pain as the chief bad and averting it so far as it can. And this it does before it has been perverted, with nature herself the uncorrupted and honest judge.”

Stage three: Formal proof of exhaustiveness. Demonstrate that the two categories together leave no remainder — that nothing can fall outside them. In physics: Lucretius’s elimination argument, showing that any proposed third existing

thing either can touch and be touched (and is therefore body) or cannot (and is therefore void). In ethics: Torquatus's explicit denial of any intermediate state between pleasure and pain.

Stage four: Elimination of further claimants. Show that anything proposed as an independent third category is in fact an attribute of one of the two that have already been identified. In physics: properties, events, time, and mind all turn out to be attributes of bodies and space, not independent existents. In ethics: virtue, wisdom, friendship, and justice all turn out to be instruments for the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, not independent values.

The illustrations throughout this article work primarily at stages one and three: they make the self-evidence of the two-category division visible and show what it looks like for two categories to leave no remainder. Understanding where they fit in the larger method helps explain what they are for — and what they are not asking to prove alone.

Part One: Illustrations from the Epicurean Texts

Bodies and Space — The Foundational Binary

The single most powerful illustration available is not borrowed from another domain. It is the foundation of Epicurean physics itself.

In the *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus begins his account of the universe with a stark declaration: everything that exists is either body or void. Not atoms, specifically — body. That which is. And the defining characteristic of body is precisely its capacity to act on other things and to be acted upon: to push and be pushed, to touch and be touched, to impact and receive impact. Void — which Epicurus calls *ἀναφής φύσις*, “intangible nature” — is defined as its perfect opposite: that which offers no resistance, which cannot touch or be touched, through which everything passes without contact.

Lucretius develops this into a closed logical argument in *De Rerum Natura* Book I. Suppose someone proposes a third kind of existence alongside bodies and space. Lucretius's answer is immediate: ask one question about this proposed third thing. Can it touch or be touched? Can it impact or receive impact? If yes — it is body. If no — it is void. There is no further category in which a third answer could be housed. The two definitions are jointly exhaustive. Any proposed third existence collapses back into one of the two the moment you press it.

The argument is worth quoting directly. At Book I, line 418: “*all nature, then, as it is of itself, is built of these two things: for there are bodies and the void, in which they are*

placed and where they move hither and thither.” At line 430, the elimination of any third nature is fully explicit:

“Besides these there is nothing which you could say is parted from all body and sundered from void, which could be discovered, as it were a third nature in the list. For whatever shall exist, must needs be something in itself; and if it suffer touch, however small and light, it will increase the count of body by a bulk great or maybe small, if it exists at all, and be added to its sum. But if it is not to be touched, inasmuch as it cannot on any side check anything from wandering through it and passing on its way, in truth it will be that which we call empty void... And so besides void and bodies no third nature by itself can be left in the list of things, which might either at any time fall within the purview of our senses, or be grasped by any one through reasoning of the mind.”

Epicurus makes the same argument in the *Letter to Herodotus*: “*And besides these two, nothing can even be thought of either by conception or on the analogy of things conceivable such as could be grasped as whole existences and not spoken of as the accidents or properties of such existences.*” The locked door is visible in the sentence structure: it is not merely that no third thing has been found, but that no third thing *can even be thought of* as a whole existence — because any candidate, on examination, resolves into one of the two, or into an attribute of one of the two.

Sedley characterizes this as a system of **formal contradictories**: body and space are each defined as the other’s opposite, and together they map the entire universe. Body is what is full and resistant; space is what is empty and intangible. “If a thing is not full, it must be empty. This simple dyadic scheme has the merit of guaranteeing that body and void are the sole contents of the universe.” The same guarantee operates in ethics: in mapping the scale of value, Epicurus says of each feeling whether it is pleasant or not — and if not painful, it is pleasant, and there is no further possibility.

This is the identical logical structure Epicurus applies to feelings. Propose a neutral state between pleasure and pain. Ask one question: is it painful? If yes — it is pain. If no — it is pleasure. Not the approach toward pleasure, not a neutral non-pain state waiting for something further to arrive, but pleasure present and actual. There is no room left for a third answer. Epicurus is not borrowing a convenient analogy from his physics. He is applying the same method, making the same move, closing the same logical door.

Before laying out the physics of bodies and space, Epicurus opens the *Letter to Herodotus* with a methodological instruction that applies with equal force to his account of feeling. We must, he says, “seize firmly the things that underlie our words” — the primary concept that each term points to must be clearly fixed — “else we shall leave everything undetermined as we dispute to infinity, or else we shall be using empty words.” This is not merely a logical caution. It is a precise diagnosis of what goes wrong in every dispute about pleasure that has run for two thousand years without resolution.

The person who has never fixed a clear first concept of what pleasure IS cannot recognize it when it is present, cannot identify its arrival, cannot distinguish having it from lacking it. They will dispute to infinity about whether the Epicurean state of pain-freedom counts as pleasure — because “pleasure” remains an empty word for them, pointing at nothing definite. The binary is Epicurus’s instrument for ending that dispute by supplying the fixed reference point: pleasure is what is present when pain is absent. Once that concept is clear, the word points to something that can actually be recognized — and will be recognized, as a matter of course, by anyone who has stopped disputing long enough to look.

The direction of the question matters. Pain is the more immediately recognizable of the two states — when acute pain is present, no one fails to notice it. Pleasure, as Epicurus defines it, is broader and in many of its forms quieter: the pleasures of memory, of friendship, of philosophical conversation, of a body simply functioning without disturbance. These are real and fully present, but they are easy to overlook because they are not dramatic.

The therapeutic point of the binary is therefore corrective in a specific way. It is not an argument for complacency or low expectations — Epicurus himself maintained an extensive circle of friends, wrote and taught without ceasing, took active pleasure in food and conversation and philosophy, and encouraged everyone around him to do the same. The correction is not “stop seeking.” It is “seek from the right foundation, and recognize what you already have so that you can build on it intelligently.” The person who cannot recognize pleasure when pain is absent keeps seeking desperately and anxiously, driven by the false conviction that they have not yet arrived — and so misses both what is already present and the direction in which genuine additional pleasure lies. The person who correctly reads the binary can pursue friendship, philosophy, and the fuller pleasures of an engaged life from a position of clarity rather than chronic restlessness. Epicurus’s argument runs in the corrective direction: begin from what everyone recognizes (pain), establish that its absence is not a neutral waiting-room for something further, and from that correct foundation pursue pleasure actively and without confusion about what it is.

The image this produces is elemental: a particle of matter against empty space. Something, and the absence of something. Two conditions, one universe.

The Relay Torch — Fire or Cold Ash

In *De Rerum Natura* Book II, Lucretius describes the succession of generations as runners in a relay race passing the torch of life: “*et quasi cursores vitae lampada*

tradunt” — “and like runners they pass on the torch of life.”

The image carries its own argument. The torch is either burning or it is not. There is no third condition for a torch: not “somewhat alight,” not “pre-ignited,” not “cooling toward neither state.” The flame either lives in the wood or it does not. The moment it goes out, what remains is not a transitional state — it is cold, dark, inert matter. Fire and its absence are the two conditions, and they leave no gap between them.

What Lucretius uses for life and death, the same logic covers pleasure and pain. Either the warmth of pleasure is present or it is not. If it is not, what remains is not an intermediate — it is the cold state, which has its own name.

The Storm and the Shore — Safety or Peril

De Rerum Natura opens Book II with one of the most famous images in Latin poetry: the man standing safely on shore watching a great storm at sea. “*Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*” — “Sweet it is, when the great sea is troubled by winds, to watch from land another’s great toil.”

The image is explicitly about pleasure and its opposite. The man on the shore is safe; the sailors are in danger. These are not points on a spectrum. You are either in the storm or you are not. You are either battered by waves and wind or you are standing on solid ground watching. The coastline is an absolute boundary — cross it in one direction and you are in the sea; step back and you are not. There is no zone between the two that is neither shore nor storm.

Lucretius uses this as a picture of the contrast between the Epicurean life and the life of those without philosophy. The man who has secured the foundations of his understanding stands on the shore. Everyone else is in the water. The image does not allow for a middle position.

The Full Vessel — Complete or Not Complete

In the opening of Book VI of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius describes a life whose cup is already full — the man who has reached the limit, who has attained what pleasure is capable of delivering, and for whom additional accumulation adds nothing because the vessel is already filled to the brim.

The image of the full vessel is not merely decorative. It makes a specific argument about limits: a cup that is full is fully full. There is no gradation between “full” and “fully full.” The filled state IS the complete state. When you pour into a full cup, the liquid does not gradually become “more full than full” — it spills, because the condition of fullness has already been reached and is already total.

In the traditional Epicurean cup model, the cup represents our life at any given time; the liquid is pleasure; the empty space is pain. As we reduce pain, we fill the cup. When the cup is full — when no empty space (pain) remains — pleasure is at its maximum. What the image illustrates is not that cups can only be in two states — full or empty — but that *fullness, once achieved, is total*. The limit is exact and complete. There is no stage between fullness and overfullness, because overfullness simply spills.

This applies directly to the binary of pleasure and pain. The removal of pain does not produce a half-state that is “not quite pleasure yet.” When the cup of pain is emptied, the cup of pleasure is full. The limit has been reached. Fullness is not an approach toward something further — it is the thing itself, arrived.

The binary of individual feelings and the continuum of degrees within the pleasant range are two distinct things. A moment of mild contentment is already a pleasure — it is in the cup, even if the cup is not yet full. A moment of deep joy is also a pleasure, with the cup fuller. When all pain is gone, the cup is at its limit. What the Full Vessel image captures is not that there are only two cup states, but that the limit of pleasure — the full cup — is a complete state, not a waiting-room for something further.

Health and Sickness — The Medical Binary

Epicurus explicitly compared philosophy to medicine and its practitioners to physicians. This was not a casual metaphor. He meant that the philosopher, like the physician, deals with a condition that is either present or absent — and that the goal of the art is to move the patient from one state to the other.

A physician examining a patient recognizes exactly two conditions: the body is either functioning as it should, or it is not. There is no clinical state called “neither healthy nor sick.” Such a state has no medical meaning. Either the infection is present or it has cleared. Either the fever is there or it is gone. When sickness is absent, health IS present — not as a separate subsequent achievement but as the immediate condition of its absence.

The Epicurean applies the same diagnosis to the whole of life. Either the pain of fear, anxiety, or bodily suffering is present, or it is not. When it is not, pleasure is present — because those are the only two things a feeling can be.

Sleep and Waking — Experience or Its Absence

Lucretius returns repeatedly to the analogy between death and dreamless sleep. The argument about death — that we need not fear it because it is simply the absence of experience — depends on the same binary. Either you are awake and experiencing, or you are in dreamless sleep and experiencing nothing. These are the two states of consciousness, and they leave no room for a third kind of being-conscious-but-not-experiencing.

The same binary holds for the sentient life more broadly. Either sensation is occurring or it is not. Either pleasure or pain is present, or sensation itself is absent — which for a living, functioning body means we have crossed from the question of what we feel into the question of whether we feel at all.

The Testimony of Torquatus — No Intermediate State

The most direct surviving ancient statement of the binary — the explicit denial of any neutral middle state between pleasure and pain — comes from Torquatus, the Epicurean spokesman in Cicero's *On Ends*, Book I (I.37-38). The passage states both the positive doctrine and the reason for it:

“For [Epicureans] do not pursue only that pleasure which moves our nature with a kind of smoothness and which the senses perceive in a rather agreeable way [kinetic pleasure], but we hold that to be the greatest pleasure which is perceived once all pain has been removed [katastematic pleasure]. For since, when our pain is removed, we rejoice in the actual freedom from and absence of all pain, and since everything we rejoice in is a pleasure, just as everything we are upset by is a pain, the removal of all pain is rightly called pleasure. For this reason Epicurus did not believe that there was anything intermediate between pain and pleasure. For the very thing which some people considered intermediate, when all pain is lacking, he considered to be not just pleasure, but even the highest pleasure. For whoever feels how he has been affected must be in a state either of pleasure or of pain.”

Three things in this passage deserve attention. First, the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasure: both are genuinely pleasures; the binary governs both; but the *highest* pleasure is the katastematic kind — the condition reached when all pain has been removed. Second, the inference: “everything we rejoice in is a pleasure, just as everything we are upset by is a pain” — these two cover the domain entirely; anything you rejoice in falls under pleasure by definition, leaving no neutral third zone where you are neither rejoicing nor distressed. Third, the explicit closing statement: “whoever feels how he has been affected must be in a state either of pleasure or of pain.” Not either pleasure, pain, or something else. Either pleasure or pain. The either/or is absolute.

A fourth point must be added to prevent a common misreading. Torquatus’s distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasure is not a ranking that makes one type superior to the other as a prescription for living. Katastematic pleasure is called the “highest” because it is the limit of the scale — the point at which no pain remains — not because the Epicurean should prefer passive contentment to active engagement. Torquatus himself notes immediately after establishing the limit that pleasures can be “varied and differentiated, but not increased and expanded” once all pain is removed. The varying and differentiating is real, important, and central to the Epicurean good life. The individual pleasures of philosophy, friendship, conversation, food, and physical activity are not collapsed into equivalence by the establishment of the limit. They differ from one another in every practical respect — in intensity, duration, kind, and consequence. What the binary and the limit together establish is the framework within which those real differences can be intelligently evaluated. The framework is not the evaluation.

The passage also confirms the connection to the Cyrenaic dispute. “The very thing which some people considered intermediate, when all pain is lacking, he considered to be not just pleasure, but even the highest pleasure.” The “some people” who held the intermediate position are precisely those — the Cyrenaics and others — who maintained that the unstimulated state, the state free of both active pleasure and active pain, was a neutral third condition. Epicurus’s response was not to meet them halfway but to reclassify that state entirely: it is not neutral, and it is not a diminished pleasure. It is the highest pleasure. The neutral middle they thought they were defending does not exist.

Metrodorus, one of Epicurus’s closest companions, captures the same position from the opposite direction. In a passage preserved by Plutarch (*Non Posse Suaviter Vivi* 1091A), he writes: “*This very thing is the good: escaping the bad — because it is not possible for the good to be placed anywhere, when nothing painful or distressing is further withdrawing.*” The good is not found in something above and beyond the removal of pain. It is the removal of pain. When nothing painful is left to withdraw, the good is fully

present. There is nowhere else for it to be placed.

Part Two: Modern Illustrations

The ancient examples carry the greatest authority because they are Epicurus's own instruments. But the same binary appears wherever nature or human technology has produced a condition that genuinely admits of no third state. The following examples work because they are real, not because they have been constructed to illustrate a point.

The Cardiac Monitor — Wave or Flatline

A cardiac monitor displays exactly two conditions: the undulating wave of a living heartbeat, and the flat line that replaces it when the heart stops. Every person who has ever been in a hospital or watched a film knows both images and knows their meaning immediately.

The flatline is not neutral. It is not the absence of a condition while awaiting a verdict. It is a fully real, fully specific state with a name and a consequence. When the wave returns, life IS present. When it does not, death IS present. No third line exists on the monitor — not because the engineers were insufficiently creative, but because nature has provided exactly two conditions to display.

This is the most immediately visceral modern image for the Epicurean binary. The wave is pleasure; the flatline is the other thing.

The Earth from Orbit — Day Side and Night Side

A photograph of Earth from space shows the terminator — the line that divides the sunlit half from the half in shadow. On one side of that line, every surface is in full daylight. On the other side, every surface is in full darkness. The line between them is the sharpest natural boundary visible from space.

Darkness is not nothing. It is not the absence of a condition while a third option is considered. It is a fully real state that exists on every surface the sun does not reach. When light arrives, darkness does not diminish toward a neutral middle — it is gone, instantly and completely, and light IS there.

The Pregnant and the Not-Pregnant

A phrase that already exists in common speech precisely because the logic is already obvious: you cannot be a little pregnant. Either the biological process has begun or it has not. There is no state of “not-pregnant but also not-not-pregnant” that one occupies while the question is pending. The moment the condition is present, it IS present — entirely, not gradually, not partially.

This example works because it is already culturally established as the canonical illustration of a true binary, recognized by anyone who has heard it.

The Verdict — Guilty or Not Guilty

A jury returns exactly one of two verdicts: guilty, or not guilty. The court does not recognize a verdict of “neither convicted nor acquitted.” Such a verdict would have no legal meaning — and more importantly, it would have no logical meaning, because the verdict is defined as the answer to a yes-or-no question. The defendant either committed the act or did not. The jury either finds this established or does not.

“Not guilty” is not a neutral outcome. It is a full verdict with full legal force and full consequences. It IS a decision, not the absence of one.

The court of sensation works identically. Either the experience is pleasant or it is not. “Not painful” is not a hung jury. It is a verdict: pleasure.

The Relay Torch — Ancient Image, Permanent Truth

The image Lucretius gave us belongs equally in this section, because it requires no historical knowledge to understand. A burning torch and a cold, dark torch: two objects, one condition present in one and absent in the other. No one needs to be told which is which. The eye reads the binary before the mind processes it.

The Logical Form — Argument Without Image

Two further examples work at the level of pure logic rather than picture, and are worth noting for that reason even though they do not reduce to a visual image.

True and false — every proposition is either true or false. There is no third truth-value called “neither true nor false.” This is the law of the excluded middle, and it applies directly: the proposition “I am experiencing pleasure” is either true or false. If false, its negation — “I am not experiencing pleasure” — is true. And “not experiencing pleasure” in a sentient being is the definition of experiencing pain.

Binary computing and the telegraph — at the physical level, every bit in a computer and every moment of a telegraph signal is either current-flowing or current-not-flowing. The entire digital world — every image, every text, every calculation — is built on a binary that has no middle position. A transistor gate is either conducting or it is not. A telegraph line is either carrying signal or it is carrying silence. These illustrate the principle with great logical clarity but do not reduce to a picture, and they require the audience to understand the underlying technology before the analogy can land.

The Common Structure

Every illustration in both lists shares the same structure:

1. There are exactly two conditions.
2. They are defined by each other — one is the presence of what the other lacks.
3. A third condition cannot be inserted between them because there is no logical space for it to occupy.
4. The moment one condition ends, the other IS present — not approaching, not about to become, but present.

This is what Epicurus means when he says pleasure and pain are the two feelings. He is not reporting an observation that could in principle have turned out otherwise. He is defining the terms in a way that closes the door on any third option by construction —

the same way he closed the door on a third kind of existence between bodies and space.

The person who insists on a neutral middle ground between pleasure and pain is in the position of someone who insists there must be a third verdict besides guilty and not guilty, or a third state for a torch besides burning and not burning. A name can be invented for such a state — but naming is not finding. The test is not whether a word can be coined but whether the thing named can be located in actual felt experience. Anyone who proposes a neutral third feeling must eventually describe what it is like to be in it; and when they do, every description will draw on either pleasant or unpleasant qualities — because feeling itself is what the binary describes, and feeling's own report always comes back as one or the other. A neutral state that can be felt as neither pleasant nor unpleasant cannot be felt at all, which means it is not a feeling. This is precisely what Epicurus warned against at the opening of the *Letter to Herodotus*: words whose referents cannot be located in actual experience produce endless dispute without result. The invented vocabulary for a neutral third feeling is a perfect specimen of the empty word — a name pointing at nothing that can be distinguished from the two states that are already there. What exists, when pain is absent, is the other of the only two things there are — which is pleasure, present, real, and complete.

The Level at Which the Binary Applies

A question raised by the binary deserves explicit treatment: does it operate at the level of individual sensations, or at the level of a whole life taken together?

The answer the Epicureans give is: **individual sensations**. *Principal Doctrine 3* states that pleasure and pain are the measures of what is to be chosen and avoided, and this operates at the level of each discrete experience. Every sensation, every moment of feeling, is either pleasant or painful. There is no neutral sensation that is neither.

This does not mean that a human life must be entirely one or the other at every moment. Epicurus himself, on his last day, experienced both simultaneously: physical pain from kidney stones, and pleasure from philosophical conversation and friendship. Body and mind can register different things at the same moment. A life is not a single sensation but a complex of many, and those many can include both pleasant and painful elements occurring together in different faculties.

The binary of feelings therefore applies to each component in that complex, not to some imagined overall average. Each discrete sensation is either pleasant or painful. These can coexist in different faculties simultaneously. The wise Epicurean works to maximize the pleasant ones and minimize the painful ones — and to ensure that the

pleasant ones are of the kind that endure and compound (philosophy, friendship, memory) rather than the kind that produce painful aftermaths.

This feature of Epicurean thought is not an objection to the binary — it is a confirmation of it. Even within a complex mixed experience, *no component is neutral*. Each feeling, considered as a discrete event of sensation, is either pleasant or painful. The neutral feeling — the sensation that is neither — cannot be found and described. Any attempt to describe it will use either pleasant or unpleasant qualities, because those are the only qualities feelings have. This is what Torquatus means when he says: “whoever feels how he has been affected must be in a state either of pleasure or of pain.” This applies to each way of being affected, individually — not to the sum of all ways at once.

Objections Considered

“What about twilight? Light and dark admit of degrees.”

The day/night illustration — Earth from orbit, with its terminator line — is challenged by the observation that twilight and dawn exist. The transition between day and night is not an instantaneous on/off but a gradual progression as the atmosphere scatters light.

Two responses are in order.

First, the objection confuses the movement of a boundary with the existence of a stable third state. At any given surface point at any given moment, the question is whether solar radiation is striking it directly or not. The answer is yes or no. At dawn, the boundary is moving toward you; at dusk, it is moving away. But a surface experiencing dawn is in transition from one state to the other — it is not occupying a stable third condition that is neither day nor night indefinitely. Transitions are real, but they are more generally and reasonably considered to be movements between states, not states of their own.

Second, and more importantly: if an illustration admits of edge cases, this does not invalidate the binary it is illustrating. The illustrations are designed to make visible a logical structure that is already established on independent grounds — from the definitions of pleasure and pain and from the explicit ancient denial of any intermediate state. The illustration is not itself the argument. Every illustration can be pressed to a point where it admits of complications. What matters is whether the central structure — two conditions, one boundary, no stable third state — is immediately visible before exceptions are invented. For most readers, with most of these illustrations, it is.

The illustrations that are most impervious to the “but what about” objection are those that are truly binary by definition: the verdict (guilty or not guilty), the biological process of pregnancy (begun or not begun), and body versus space in Epicurean physics (defined as formal contradictories, leaving nothing outside them by construction). Illustrations that map onto a conceptual binary rather than defining one — storm and shore, day and night, the burning torch — make the binary visible to immediate perception. Their value is in the recognition, not in arguing that the illustration is itself the logical proof.

“A cup can be partially full. The Full Vessel section seems to imply cups are only full or empty.”

This objection points to a real distinction that must be made explicit.

The Full Vessel image illustrates the *limit* of pleasure — the completeness and totality of the pleasant state once all pain has been removed. It does not claim that cups can only be in two states. A cup can of course be partially full, and in the traditional Epicurean cup model this represents the normal state of a life in which pain has been partially but not fully reduced. As pain decreases (the cup fills), pleasure increases. These are degrees within the category of pleasure, not a binary.

The binary of feelings — pleasant or painful — operates at the level of each individual sensation. The continuum of degrees — how intense, how long-lasting, how many — operates within the categories. These are two distinct claims. The binary does not say “you are either at maximum pleasure or at maximum pain, with nothing in between.” It says: every individual sensation is either pleasant or painful, with no neutral third type. A moment of mild contentment is a pleasure. A moment of sharp joy is also a pleasure, at greater intensity. Neither is neutral.

What the Full Vessel image captures is not that there are only two cup states, but that **fullness, once achieved, is total**. When the cup is full, it is completely full — not “mostly full” or “approaching full from below.” The limit is exact. Applied to the binary: when pain has been fully removed, the pleasure that results is not a preliminary stage or an approach toward something. It is the highest pleasure — katastematic, complete, at the limit.

“Aren’t ‘pleasure’ and ‘absence of pain’ interchangeable? But treating them as interchangeable implies you experience no pleasure until all pain is gone.”

This objection, often raised by readers familiar with Epicurus, points to a genuinely important distinction.

“Pleasure” and “absence of pain” are co-extensive: every state of absence of pain is a state of pleasure, and every state of pleasure is a state in which no pain is occurring (in that faculty, at that moment). In this sense they are interchangeable. But they carry different implications about degree.

“Absence of pain,” as a description of the highest pleasure, specifically denotes the condition in which no pain remains at all. This is the *limit* of pleasure. It does not follow that you experience no pleasure until you reach that limit. You are experiencing pleasure whenever any individual sensation is pleasant — which can happen while other pains are simultaneously present elsewhere in your experience (as with Epicurus on his last day, as described above).

Torquatus’s passage clarifies this directly. Epicurus distinguishes two kinds of pleasure: kinetic (the smooth sensation of stimulation to active enjoyment) and katastematic (the stable state once all pain is removed). Both are genuinely pleasures. The binary says every individual sensation is either pleasant or painful. Among pleasant sensations, some are kinetic and some katastematic. The removal of *all* pain does not produce the *first* pleasure — it produces the *highest* pleasure. Pleasures are already present at every level above zero pain.

The interchangeability of “pleasure” and “absence of pain” is therefore true at the level of categorical membership: any sensation that is not painful is pleasant. The description “absence of pain” as the highest pleasure specifies the *degree* — the maximum — not a condition required before any pleasure begins. Understanding both levels together prevents the misreading that the Epicurean must achieve complete pain-freedom before experiencing pleasure at all. Pleasure is already there whenever any individual sensation is not painful. What changes as pain decreases is not whether pleasure exists but how much of it there is.

“The analogies are strained and will create more confusion than they clarify.”

Any illustration can be misread, and a badly misread illustration can mislead more than it helps.

The response is not to abandon the illustrations but to be precise about what each one is illustrating. The purpose of every illustration here is to make visible a specific logical structure — two conditions, one boundary, no stable third state — in a domain where that structure is already obvious before any philosophical argument has been made. The illustration is not the argument. The argument stands independently: on the definitions of pleasure and pain, their joint exhaustiveness as established by Epicurus, and the explicit denial of any neutral intermediate state by Torquatus and Metrodorus. The illustrations show the same structure in more immediately recognizable forms.

Different illustrations work for different audiences. If any individual illustration fails to produce recognition — if it creates confusion about what is being illustrated — it has not done its job for that reader. Others are available. The cardiac monitor works immediately for anyone who has been near a hospital or seen a movie about emergency rooms. The verdict works for anyone with legal familiarity. The pregnant/not-pregnant is already culturally established as the canonical all-or-nothing example. The bodies and space binary carries the greatest philosophical authority because it is the instrument Epicurus himself applied in physics and then transferred to ethics — the same method, the same move.

And if all the illustrations fail, the argument from definitions and from the Torquatus passage stands on its own. The illustrations invite recognition of the issue and the argument addresses potential ambiguities.

”Does this argument claim that all pleasures are equal, or that katastematic pleasure is superior to kinetic pleasure?”

Neither. This is one of the most persistent misreadings of the binary argument, and it deserves a direct answer.

The binary of pleasure and pain is a philosophical claim about categories — it establishes that every feeling falls into one of two classifications, and that nothing falls outside them. It says nothing about the relative value, intensity, duration, or desirability of individual pleasures compared to one another. The pleasure of trimming one’s toenails and the pleasure of a lifetime of philosophical friendship are both pleasures — both on the pleasure side of the line, neither pain. The binary says exactly that and nothing more. It says nothing whatever about whether these two experiences are equal in value, intensity, or any practical dimension. They are not equal. No Epicurean has ever said they are.

This is what it means to reason philosophically rather than prescriptively. Philosophy speaks in generalities so that the general principle can be applied intelligently to particulars. “All pleasant experiences fall under the category of pleasure” is a general claim about classification. “The pleasure of building a rocket is greater than the pleasure of trimming your toenails” is a particular judgment about relative value. These are two entirely different levels of statement, and confusing them produces the misreading. Anyone who reads the binary as a claim that all pleasures are equivalent has read a general categorical claim as a prescription for individual experience — which is to read it backwards.

The same point applies to kinetic versus katastematic pleasure. To say that katastematic pleasure — the condition in which no pain remains — is the “highest”

pleasure is to identify the limit of the scale, not to prescribe a preference for passive living over active engagement. Torquatus himself notes that once the limit of pain-removal is established, pleasures are “varied and differentiated.” The variation and differentiation is the whole subject matter of practical Epicurean ethics. Which pleasures compound intelligently over time? Which produce painful aftermaths? Which depend on circumstances beyond your control, making them vulnerable, and which can be secured even in adversity? These questions, and the wisdom needed to answer them, are what Epicurean philosophy exists to cultivate. The binary establishes the playing field. The entire game — the active pursuit of a richly pleasurable life — is played within it.

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