

Life Is Desirable, But Unlimited Time Contains No Greater Pleasure Than Limited Time

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1. Explanation

- Find out more in our [Discussion Guide](#). Listen to our special [Lucretius Today Podcast Episode 270](#) devoted to this topic.
- As we close this list of some of Epicurus's most important doctrines, by now it should be no surprise that Epicurus held that life is very desirable. How could he reason otherwise, given that life is a necessity for the experience of pleasure, and pleasure is what Nature has given us as the goal to pursue? But Epicurus knew that humanity is not only fearful of death, but that we covet so strongly the possibility of living forever that we are constantly tempted by mystical claims offering us false promises of eternal life. Epicurus saw that he needed to answer that challenge, and deal with the concern that the inevitable death of our friends and ourselves constitutes a stain on life which forever spoils our happiness. Such a negative view of life was unacceptable to Epicurus, and he pointed out that death in fact does not deprive us of nearly so much as we think it does.
- Epicurus explains to us that his philosophy allows us to see that no matter how long we live, unlimited time can contain no "greater" pleasure than limited time. This is because time (duration) is only one aspect of pleasure. It makes no more sense for us to seek the longest time of life as the greatest pleasure as it would for us to measure the largest quantity of food at a banquet as being the best way to eat. While time is a relevant dimension, time is not at all the complete picture of pleasure, because pleasure involves not just time but intensity, and the part of the our experience that is affected; and in the end the "best" pleasure is a subjective assessment. Epicurus tells us we can see this by considering the person at a banquet, as already mentioned. Epicurus wrote to Menoeceus that the wise man at a banquet will choose not the *most* food, but the *best* food, and held that our desire should not be for the *longest* life, but the *most pleasant* life.
- When you remember the Epicurean worldview that there is no supernatural god, no absolute virtue or right and wrong to which we must conform, we can see that the decision as to what is the best life - the most complete life for us - is a matter for us to decide, and that time is neither the most important factor nor the determiner of our decision. Epicurus teaches us to compare our lives to a banquet, or to a jar that we are filling with water. What we should want to do is not to eat the most food, or continue pouring water into the jar after it is full, but to see that the "fullness of pleasure" and the completeness of life is something that we can retain despite our limited lifespans. No jar can be filled more full than full, and no life can be made more complete than complete: once we see that our target is a "complete" life, then "variation" - or the continuous adding-on of new pleasurable experiences -- does not make the experience any more pleasant. And since it is pleasure that Nature gives us as our goal, Epicurean philosophy gives us a fighting chance - if we work to understand it and apply it properly - to consider our lives to be complete and in no need of unlimited time.

2. Citations

1. [PD19](#). Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure.

2. Letter to Menoeceus 126: "And he who counsels the young man to live well, but the old man to make a good end, is foolish, not merely because of the desirability of life, but also because it is the same training which teaches to live well and to die well."
3. [PD18](#). The pleasure in the flesh is not increased when once the pain due to want is removed, but is only varied: and the limit as regards pleasure in the mind is begotten by the reasoned understanding of these very pleasures, and of the emotions akin to them, which used to cause the greatest fear to the mind.
4. [PD20](#). The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life.
5. [PD21](#). He who has learned the limits of life knows that that which removes the pain due to want, and makes the whole of life complete, is easy to obtain, so that there is no need of actions which involve competition.

3. Notes

1. Major Implications: Life is generally desirable because it generally affords the opportunity for pleasure.
2. *Find out more in our [Ethics Forum](#) and our Wiki.*
3. [Discussion Forum:](#)