

Epicurean Ethics

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Epicurean ethics centers on the pursuit of a pleasurable life. The foundation of this ethical system is built on the belief that pleasure is the highest good (telos), and the natural end of human existence. A key aspect of this system is that "pleasure" is not held to involve sensory stimulation alone, but includes all activities and conditions of life which are not painful.

1. Life Is Desirable And Death Is Undesirable

Epicurus held that Life is desirable, because it affords the opportunity for pleasure. However there are times when we will give our life for a friend, or we will accept death as the better alternative when living on would mean more pain than pleasure. Epicurus wrote in his Letter to Menoeceus that [126] [H]e 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. Yet much worse still is the man who says it is good not to be born but *'once born make haste to pass the gates of Death'*.

2. The Feelings Of Pleasure And Pain

Epicurus identified pleasure as the primary motivator of human action. From birth, humans seek pleasure and avoid pain, indicating that pleasure is a fundamental component of life. As a general rule, pleasure is desirable and pain is undesirable, but circumstances may at times require that some pleasures must be avoided and some pains must be chosen.

What Epicurus meant by "pleasure" has been disputed for two thousand years. That controversy continues today, with some - often influenced by Stoicism or Buddhism or other viewpoints - interpreting Epicurus as advising a life of asceticism, total withdrawal from society, and the pursuit of "tranquility" above all else.

In contrast, those who knew the Epicureans best were clear: they understood Epicurus as teaching that "Pleasure," and not "Tranquility" or any other particular pleasure, should be considered to be the ultimate goal of life. Rather than limiting pleasure to tranquility alone, Epicurus taught that "pleasure" should be considered to include *every experience in life that is not painful*. Epicurus held this perspective to be correct because Nature gives us only "pleasure" and "pain" by which to determine what to choose and what to avoid. From Epicurus' point of view, if we are alive and feeling anything at all, we are feeling *either pleasure or pain, with no middle ground or third alternative*. From this perspective, every agreeable experience of life, whether of the body, of the mind, or of the "spirit," comes within the meaning of "pleasure."

Quote from Diogenes Laertius 10:34

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

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:30

"Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain

2.1. There Are Only Two Feelings: If You Are Not Feeling Pain You Are Feeling Pleasure

As seen in the citations collected here, the doctrine *that there are only two feelings, and that if you are alive you are feeling one or the other*, is well documented in Epicurean literature. Epicurus would have presumed any regular student of his to know this, and likely for that reason it is not stated specifically in the Letter to Menoeceus. Those who fail to understand the premise that there are only two feelings therefore frequently make the mistake of thinking that "absence of pain" must mean "something else" than pleasure itself. Many of the most egregious misinterpretations of Epicurus arise from the failure to understand this premise.

If you are not feeling pain you are feeling pleasure, and so to Epicurus the word "[pleasure](#)" includes not only agreeable sensory stimulation of mind and body but also all normal and healthy experiences of mind and body. Both are not painful, and both are therefore pleasurable. Pleasure therefore includes every non-painful moment of life of mind or body, whether "in motion" or "at rest," and not just moments of stimulation:

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:38

Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."

Quote

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking For Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:39

For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure.

This position can also be seen in the Epicurean comparison of two people who are not in pain, but who are seemingly in very different conditions: A host at a party who is pouring wine to a guest who is drinking it. Here is the example:

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 2:16

On Ends 2:16 : "This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?" [Torquatus objects to the question as quibbling but the implicit answer is "yes" based on the condition of "not being thirsty" and "the thirsty man who drinks" both being conditions of pleasure.]

An application of this perspective can be seen in Principal Doctrine 09: *"If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted, and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another."* By referring to the different aspects of the experience of pleasure in intensity, in duration, and in location of the body that they effect, Epicurus is presuming that regardless of these differences in manner of experience, all are properly considered to be within the wider meaning of the word "pleasure."

Seen in this way, Epicurean philosophy is neither "hedonistic" nor "ascetic," as those terms are generally viewed today. Instead, Epicurus assures us that all types of healthy non-painful function of both body and mind are pleasurable and therefore desirable, and in this way a life full of pleasure is attainable.

2.2. There Is No Neutral State Or Third Alternative

That Pleasure and Pain are separate and unmixed in any particular feeling was important enough to be listed among the top doctrines of Epicurus:

Quote from Epicurus' Principal Doctrine 3

PD03: "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once ."

To illustrate how it is possible to grasp the view that there is no neutral state or third alternative, a parallel may be drawn with Epicurean physics. In Epicurean physics, every specific location in the universe is occupied either by one of two things, matter or void, with no mixture or third alternative.

We can view human life in a similar way. Epicurean ethics holds that everything in life is either agreeable or disagreeable, in other words pleasure or pain. When we remind ourselves of the vast nothingness that passed before our birth and will pass after our death, we see that every moment of life when we are not in pain is worthy of being considered agreeable and pleasurable, and can in fact be so if we approach life with the proper attitude. Even in those moments when we face pain in *some* part of our experience, we can look to the *other* parts of our mental and physical experience to find pleasure, and thus more reason for joy than for vexation.

Some will ask: "Are not bodies mixtures of atoms and void, and human lives mixtures of pleasure and pain, and are not these mixtures a third alternative?" The Epicurean response is that mixtures are not third alternatives that destroy the integrity of component parts. In Physics, "Bodies" are properly viewed as existing as combinations of matter and void, but within bodies, matter and void are properly viewed as retaining their individual identities. Likewise, a human life as a whole is properly viewed as existing as a combination of pleasures and pains, but within a life, pleasures and pains are properly viewed as retaining their individual identities. Despite the difference in their levels of observation, both perspectives are valid. As a distinguished expert on Epicurus has written:

Quote from Professor David Sedley, In "Epicurus' Rejection of Determinism"

"Almost uniquely among Greek philosophers [Epicurus] arrived at what is nowadays the unreflective assumption of almost anyone with a smattering of science, that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter; but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth."

2.3. The Term "Absence of Pain" Means Exactly the Same Thing As "Pleasure"

The insight that makes sense of the entire discussion is that for the reasons stated above, Epicurus was defining all conditions of awareness where pain is not present to be pleasure. It is significant to specify "conditions of awareness" because he is not saying that a rock, which is not feeling pain, to be feeling pleasure. Only the living can feel pleasure or pain, but when you are aware of your condition all of your feelings can be categorized as either painful or pleasurable. You can see this sweeping categorization stated specifically here:

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 2:9

"...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 2:11

"Still, I replied, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Clearly the same, he says, and indeed the greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be.."

2.4. The Term "Highest Pleasure" Does Not Refer To A Particular Or Unique Type of Pleasure, But To Any Experience Of Pleasure Unaccompanied By Pain

The realization that "absence of pain" is simply another term for pleasure dissolves any mystery about Epicurus' view of the role of pleasure. "Absence of pain" does not constitute some special or "fancy" kind of pleasure, but simply the observation that the most complete pleasure is that which is unadulterated with any mixture of pain. Torquatus weaves together both positions in dramatically clear fashion in the statement just cited (On Ends 2:11). This linkage is stated just as clearly in Principle Doctrine 3, third in importance in Epicurean doctrine only to the observations that there are no supernatural gods and no life after death:

Quote from Epicurus' Principal Doctrine 3

PD03: "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once ."

When we choose to consider any particular experience of life we find pleasurable, that experience constitutes by definition an experience in which pain is absent. When we choose to consider any combination of experiences in life, either all of those we are experiencing at this moment, or over any length of time, the limit in magnitude of the pleasure portion of that combination of experiences is reached when each element of the combination is pleasurable, and no part of that combination is composed of any pain. This difference in perspective is as different in kind from Stoicism or Buddhism as a glass that is full of water is different from an empty glass of water which is full of air. Both glasses are "full" of something, but the difference in content could not be more different. Epicurus sees complete pleasure as a glass completely full of drops of water, representing all the types of pleasure available to us in life. Those who interpret "absence of pain" as nothingness do not appreciate that what has drained the glass of air (pain) is not "nothingness," but water (pleasure.)

2.5. Continuous Happiness Is Achievable Through Seeing That Pleasure Overshadows Pain

By rejecting standard attitudes toward pleasure, Epicurus recognized that *absence of pain is pleasure, just as absence of pleasure is pain. Any feeling which is not a pleasure is a pain, and any feeling which is not a pain is a pleasure.* Once the error of seeing this formulation in Buddhist/Stoic eyes as nothingness or unity with divine fire is stripped away, the full value of this perspective can be seen: this perspective lays the groundwork for actually achieving a life in which **pleasure overshadows pain and in which continuous happiness is possible:**

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:62

For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the

eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.

This is how Epicurus can say that the wise man is continuously feeling pleasure, and how he defines the absence of pain as the highest pleasure. Epicurus is not talking specifically about the most intense stimulation, which we may or may not just to be worthwhile when we consider the scope of our entire life. Epicurus is talking philosophically that the most "complete" condition of pleasure is defined as any condition where absolutely all pain is gone. The wise man will realize that this is the most "complete" pleasure even though it is not the most intense stimulation:

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking for Epicurus in Cicero's On Ends 1:56

"By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain. [57] But as we are elated by the blessings to which we look forward, so we delight in those which we call to memory. Fools however are tormented by the recollection of misfortunes; wise men rejoice in keeping fresh the thankful recollection of their past blessings. Now it is in the power of our wills to bury our adversity in almost unbroken forgetfulness, and to agreeably and sweetly remind ourselves of our prosperity. But when we look with penetration and concentration of thought upon things that are past, then, if those things are bad, grief usually ensues, if good, joy."

This sweeping redefinition of the life of pleasure - rather than the gluttony or asceticism which his detractors assert - is the hallmark of the Epicurean approach to living. As one biographer of Epicurus observed:

Quote from Norman DeWitt, "Epicurus And His Philosophy" page 240

The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. **The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.**

2.6. Pleasure, Not Virtue Or Piety, Is The Supreme Good

In this revolutionary approach to the best life, to the dismay of other philosophers, "Pleasure" is identified as the Supreme Good, rather than Virtue or Piety or Tranquility or Rationality or any other conventional ideal. The Epicureans stated this boldly and emphatically:

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking For Epicurus In Cicero's On Ends 1:29

We are inquiring, then, into what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in Pleasure; Pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, and Pain the Chief Evil.

Quote from Torquatus, Speaking For Epicurus In Cicero's On Ends 1:40

"Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance. When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better?" (*On Ends* [40] XII)

2.7. Better To Speak Frankly What Is Of Benefit To All, Even If None Agree, Rather Than Compromise

Epicurus' rejection of commonplace assumptions was by no means limited to the prevailing definition of "[pleasure](#)." Epicurean philosophy leads to a re-examination of many other common misconceptions, including those regarding "[gods](#)," "[virtue](#)," "[good and evil](#)," and even the status of "logic."

In Epicurean terms, "[gods](#)" do exist, and it is important to act "[virtuously](#)," but "[gods](#)" are not supernatural or omniscient beings which create universes or control human affairs, and "[virtue](#)" is not desirable as an end in itself, but as a means of obtaining pleasure. "Good" and "evil" are not abstract absolutes, but are ultimately evaluations based on sensations of pleasure and pain felt by real living beings. "Dialectical logic" is rejected as misleading, while at the same time "Practical Reason" is embraced as essential for living happily. All of these are important topics to explore and clarify, and that's what we do here at EpicureanFriends.

Quote from Vatican Saying 29

For I would certainly prefer, as I study Nature, to announce frankly what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than to compromise with common opinions, and thus reap the frequent praise of the many.

2.8. We Are Born One And Cannot Be Born Twice

As the Epicureans held, "We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness. Life is wasted in procrastination, and each one of us dies while occupied."

If you too wish to avoid postponing your happiness, we invite you to join with us in studying and applying Epicurean philosophy as the ancient Epicureans understood it.

2.9. Why Do I Read All Over The Internet That Epicurus Prioritized Katastematic Over Kinetic Pleasure?

The answer to this question can be very simple. For example, a first answer, embraced by writers such as Norman DeWitt and Gosling & Taylor, and perhaps best explained by [Boris Nikolsky](#), is that it is clear that *Pleasure* is a term that embraces *all* kinds of pleasure. Epicurean texts are clear that it is "Pleasure," and not pleasures of motion (kinetic), or pleasures of rest (katastematic), or pleasures of any particular type, that constitute a "best" or "highest" form of pleasure.

On the other hand, the answer can be very complex, as there is much dispute over how to interpret Epicurus' references to "absence of pain." An alternative answer, embraced by the majority of modern Academics, is that katastematic pleasure equals absence of pain, and since absence of pain can be considered to be "the greatest pleasure," then katastematic pleasure is the true goal of Epicurean philosophy.

We have much discussion of this question in the forums [here](#).

As a summary of the position taken by Cassius Amicus at EpicureanFriends, we would start with what Diogenes Laertius recorded at line 136 (Bailey):

Epicurus differs from the Cyrenaics about pleasure. For they do not admit static pleasure, but only that which consists in motion. But Epicurus admits both kinds both in the soul and in the body, as he says in the work on Choice and Avoidance and in the book on The Ends of Life and in the first book On Lives and in the letter to his friends in Mytilene. Similarly, Diogenes in the 17th book of Miscellanies and Metrodorus in the Timocrates speak thus: 'Pleasure can be thought of both as consisting in motion and as static.' And Epicurus in the work on Choice speaks as follows: 'Freedom from trouble in the mind and from pain in the body are static pleasures, but Joy and exultation are considered as active pleasures involving motion.'

Note first that to the extent that Epicurus was observing that pleasures may be thought of in terms of "motion," this is a clear statement that Epicurus considered to be pleasure both experiences which *do* and *do not* involve *motion*.

Then, note that Epicurus states in the letter to Menoeceus is that in his philosophy, the term *pleasure* "denominates the very same thing as *absence of pain*:" "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul." The term pleasure does not refer *only* to absence of pain, but to all types of pleasure, including joy, delight, and all pleasures that are clearly pleasures of "motion," just as much as the term refers to any other kind of pleasure.

This equivalence is driven home by the Epicurean spokesman in Cicero's On Ends:

- **Diogenes Laertius X-34** : "The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined."
- **On Ends Book One, 30** : "Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. _Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?"
- **On Ends Book One, 38** : "Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. _Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."
- **On Ends Book One, 39**: "For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure."

- **On Ends Book One, 56** : *By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain. [57] But as we are elated by the blessings to which we look forward, so we delight in those which we call to memory. Fools however are tormented by the recollection of misfortunes; wise men rejoice in keeping fresh the thankful recollection of their past blessings. Now it is in the power of our wills to bury our adversity in almost unbroken forgetfulness, and to agreeably and sweetly remind ourselves of our prosperity. But when we look with penetration and concentration of thought upon things that are past, then, if those things are bad, grief usually ensues, if good, joy.*
- **On Ends Book One, 62** : *But these doctrines may be stated in a certain manner so as not merely to disarm our criticism, but actually to secure our sanction. For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. _Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. _And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.*
- **On Ends Book Two, 9** : Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."
- **On Ends, Book Two, 11**: Cicero: *Still, I replied, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?"* Torquatus: "Clearly the same, he says, and indeed the greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be." (Plane idem, inquit, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest. Cic. Fin. 2.11)
- **On Ends Book Two, 16** : *"This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?"*
- **Epicurus to Idomeneus, Diogenes Laertius**: *On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. _My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your lifelong attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus._*
- **Lucretius Book 3 line 98**: *_"Thus often the body, which is clear to see, is sick, when, all the same we feel pleasure in some other hidden part; and contrariwise it happens that the reverse often comes to be in turn, when one wretched in mind feels pleasure in all his body; in no other wise than if, when a sick man's foot is painful, all the while, may be, his head is in no pain. Moreover, when the limbs are given up to soft sleep, and the heavy body lies slack and senseless, yet there is something else in us, which at that very time is stirred in many ways, and admits within itself all the motions of joy and baseless cares of heart."*

- **Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights** : Gellius shows us a list of examples where highly reputable Greek writers were using the negation of a term as the extreme point of its opposite, and he includes within the list Epicurus' use of "absence of pain." - 9 But concerning inlaudatus it seems possible to give two answers. One is of this kind: There is absolutely no one who is of so perverted a character as not sometimes to do or say something that can be commended (laudari). And therefore this very ancient line has become a familiar proverb: Oft-times even a fool expresses himself to the purpose. 10 But one who, on the contrary, in his every act and at all times, deserves no praise (laude) at all is inlaudatus, and such a man is the very worst and most despicable of all mortals, just as freedom from all reproach makes one inculpatus (blameless). Now inculpatus is the synonym for perfect goodness; therefore conversely inlaudatus represents the limit of extreme wickedness. 11 It is for that reason that Homer usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults; for example: "And not unwillingly they charged," and again: 15 "Not then would you divine Atrides see Confused, inactive, nor yet loath to fight." 12 Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain, in these words: 16 "The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of all that pains." 13 Again Virgil on the same principle called the Stygian pool "unlovely." 14 For just as he expressed abhorrence of the "unpraised" man by the denial of praise, 15 so he abhorred the "unlovable" by the denial of love. 16 Another defence of inlaudatus is this: laudare in early Latin means "to name" and "cite." Thus in civil actions they use laudare of an authority, when he is cited. 17 Conversely, the inlaudatus is the same as p141 the inlaudabilis, namely, one who is worthy neither of mention nor remembrance, and is never to be named; 18 as, for example, in days gone by the common council of Asia decreed that no one should ever mention the name of the man who had burned the temple of Diana at Ephesus. 18

3. Free Will Frees Us From Determinism And Fate

From Norman Dewitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy" Chapter 10 - "The New Freedom"

Since Epicurus was the first to view the rational pursuit of happiness as a practical problem, it was naturally he who first came to grips with the problem of freedom and determinism. Having once assumed that happiness is the goal of life and that the rational pursuit of it presumes both the freedom of the individual and the possibility of planning the whole life, he was bound to single out all those external compulsions to which antecedent and contemporary thought had yielded belief and one by one to demonstrate them to be nonexistent, escapable, or conquerable. In this he was a natural pragmatist, assuming both the need and feasibility of controlling experience.

To begin, as usual, with the synoptic view, this is adequately set forth in a scholium. It should be noted that the problem of freedom arises as part of the problem of causation and that three causes are here presumed, necessity, chance, and human volition: "And he says in other books that some things happen of necessity, some from chance and others through our own choice." To this statement are added supporting reasons, which apply to the three causes respectively: "because necessity is subject to no correction and chance is a fickle thing but the part that is left to us is free of control, to which, incidentally, blame and the opposite naturally attach themselves." Thus in outline the limits of freedom and of moral responsibility are clearly recognized.

The content of the scholium admits of expansion through particulars that are available. Various kinds of necessity were recognized. One of these was observed in the movements of the heavenly bodies; mechanistic causes were assigned to these and no significance for human conduct was recognized. 2 Another sort of necessity was that of infinite physical causation, sponsored by Democritus, from which escape was discovered through postulating the swerve of the atoms, that is, a degree of free play sufficient to permit of free will in the individual. Still another sort of necessity was that arising from the interference of the gods in the affairs of men. This was eliminated by declaring the gods to be exclusively concerned with their own happiness. A fourth kind of necessity was dialectical. This was simply ignored. For example, when the disjunctive proposition, "Tomorrow Hermarchus will either be alive or dead," was put up to Epicurus, he declined to give an answer. He was too wary a dialectician himself to swallow a dialectical bait.

4. Desire - Choice And Avoidance

Epicurus categorized desires into three types: natural and necessary, natural but not necessary, and neither natural nor necessary. Natural and necessary desires, such as the need for food and shelter, must be satisfied to maintain a healthy and happy life. Natural but not necessary desires, like the craving for luxury foods, can enhance life but are not essential. Desires that are neither natural nor necessary, such as the pursuit of wealth and fame, are more difficult to obtain, and frequently lead to anxiety and dissatisfaction. As a general approach, evaluating desires to identify which of these categories they constitute will be of assistance in predicting the amount of pleasure and pain likely to be encountered as a result of their pursuit. In the end, however, the goal sought is that of "greatest" pleasure, which must be determined according to individual context and preference, and which is not subject to objective classification.

1. [There Is No Necessity To Live Under The Control of Necessity - Rejection of Determinism](#)
2. There Is No Fate Or Fortune
3. Desire Is Not Inherently Painful Or Pleasurable
4. Selecting Among Desires Using To The "Natural," "Necessary," And "Empty" Categories
5. Weighing Pleasures And Pains
6. Activity, Rest, And Procrastination

Epicurus introduced a practical approach to ethics known as the calculus of advantage, which involves evaluating the consequences of our actions in terms of pleasure and pain. This rational method helps individuals make choices that maximize pleasure and minimize pain. By carefully assessing the potential outcomes of actions, one can achieve a pleasureable life, and always have more reason for joy than for vexation. This approach emphasizes the importance of wisdom in guiding ethical decisions and achieving long-term happiness, but does not make wisdom a goal in itself.

5. Friendship And Engagement With Society

Friendship holds a major place in Epicurean ethics due to its productiveness in contributing to pleasure and happiness. Epicurus held that friendship is the a primary tool for obtaining security and comfort, helping individuals face life's challenges. Friendship should be based on mutual benefit and trust, enhancing the quality of life. Epicurus considered the cultivation of friendships as one of the highest pleasures and a vital component of a happy life.

For an in-depth treatment of this issue with many quotations, see "[Not All Politicians Are Sisyphus - What Roman Epicureans Were Taught About Politics](#)" by Jeffrey Fish. Fish states: "Epicurus and his followers did not discourage the possession of power per se, only the ambitious pursuit of it. Their position was much more nuanced than Cicero and Plutarch or their modern counterparts would have us believe." Further:

"I maintain ... that On the Good King itself constitutes a positive case for a form of Epicurean statesmanship. Although Philodemus' analysis of Homeric kings makes use of several stock elements from kingship literature, he concentrates on one theme especially compatible with Epicureanism, and one, I think, especially articulated within the school. KD 7 identifies glory as a risky pleasure, but adds that there would be no reason not to enjoy it were it risk-free. A ruler's virtuous exercise of power leads to, or at least tends to promote, his safety. I suggest that, with the help of Philodemus and others like him, Roman statesmen were able to connect two strands of Epicurean thought in order to justify their political life: one, that a person's virtues are productive of the good will and love of others, actual pleasures in themselves; the other, that power can in fact lead to safety. Combining the two could result in the claim that the virtuous exercise of political power can sometimes provide safety as well as pleasure to a ruler. Epicurean statesmen in previous generations likely held a similar point of view."

...

"Instructions on the subject of political prominence, like those regarding education, must have been situational rather than dogmatic." That is to say, they were not maxims at all. Their basic message was that individuals born into obscurity should be grateful for that fact and should not strive for fame or attract unnecessary attention to themselves. The kind of person at whom this message was directed would have

been quite opposite to someone who, to borrow a phrase from Cicero, had been 'consul-designate from birth.' The Epicureans had advice for both kinds of people, and a method for evaluating options that promised to maximize happiness Whatever the relevant circumstances. There is no suggestion in any surviving source that a person born to the kind of station referred to by Cicero would be expected to go through the tumultuous process of trying to dismantle all of his inherited privileges and responsibilities."

...

"Lucretius acknowledges both the nobility by birth of the poem's addressee (Memmi clara propago), and the need for him to attend to politics more than philosophy in the trying times Rome currently faces (patriai tempore iniquo) (1.41–3). Ex hypothesi, the purpose of the poem cannot have been to withdraw Memmius from politics."

From the [Principal Doctrines](#):

[PD07](#) - Some men wished to become famous and conspicuous, thinking that they would thus win for themselves safety from other men. Wherefore if the life of such men is safe, they have obtained the good which nature craves; but if it is not safe, they do not possess that for which they strove at first by the instinct of nature.

[PD39](#) - The man who best knows how to meet external threats **makes into one family all the creatures he can**; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life.⁴⁰ Those who possess the power to defend themselves against threats by their neighbors, being thus in possession of the surest guarantee of security, live the most pleasant life **with one another**; and their enjoyment **of the fullest intimacy** is such that if one of them dies prematurely, the others do not lament his death as though it called for pity.

Philodemus *On Flattery*: ". . . the argument demonstrates that they endure to pay such a great price in evils on account of . . . ; so therefore, good reputation was pursued according to nature for the sake of security (from men), good reputation which is open to non-philosophical men and philosophers alike; not for the sake of any vice, among which [sc. vices] flattery plays the first role, and recklessly puts upon one greater disrepute whenever it is supposed to accomplish good reputation . . ."

Philodemus *On The Good King*: "Departing therefore from such topics, let us again recommend that which is good for a king, to be averse to a harsh, austere and bitter character, and to practise gentleness, goodness and a king's mildness and leniency as much as possible, since these lead to a sound monarchy and not arbitrary rule based on fear of a despot. (Col. 24,6–18 Dorandi, with minor changes)"

Metrodorus Fragment (see Fish article): 'It is necessary to tell how a person will best uphold the purpose of his nature and how, *as far as it depends on his own will*, he is not to present himself for public office in the first place'.

Plutarch (see Fish article): " Not even Epicurus thought men who were in love with fame and honour should lead a quiet life, but they should indulge their nature by taking part in politics and public life, on the grounds that they are constitutionally more likely to be disturbed and corrupted by inactivity, if they do not obtain what they want. But he is a fool to encourage to participate in public affairs, not those who are most able, but those who cannot live a quiet life."

From Cicero's [De Finibus](#):

"Holding as I do this theory, what reason should I have for fearing that I may not be able to bring our Torquatus into accord with it? ... I shall maintain this, that if they performed those actions, which are beyond question noble, from some motive, their motive was not virtue apart from all else. He stripped the foe of his necklet. Yes, and he donned it himself to save his own life. But he faced a grave danger. Yes, with the whole army looking on. What did he gain by it? Applause and affection, which are the strongest guarantees for passing life in freedom from fear.

...

"There remains a topic that is pre-eminently germane to this discussion, I mean the subject of Friendship. Your school maintains that if pleasure be the Chief Good, friendship will cease to exist. Now Epicurus' pronouncement about friendship is that of all the means to happiness that wisdom has devised, none is greater, none more fruitful, none more delightful than this. Nor did he only commend this doctrine by his eloquence, but far more by the example of his life and conduct. How great a thing such friendship is, is shown by the mythical stories of antiquity. Review the legends from the remotest ages, and, copious and varied as they are, you will barely find in them three pairs of friends, beginning with Theseus and ending with Orestes. Yet Epicurus in a single house and that a small one maintained a whole company of friends, united by the closest sympathy and affection; and this still goes on in the Epicurean school."

[Vatican Saying 66](#). We show our feeling for our friends' suffering, not with laments, but with thoughtful concern.

[Vatican Saying 78](#). The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship; of these, the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one.

Discussion of this question is [here](#).

6. The Relationship Of Happiness To Pleasure

In his [letter to Menoecus](#), Epicurus makes many relevant statements, but he himself does not provide a precise definition of "happiness," and the choice not to provide a precise definition of the term should itself be considered significant. Later Epicureans, however, provided direct statements that are found in other primary sources, such as [Diogenes of Oinoanda's Inscription](#) and Epicurean sections of Cicero's [On Ends](#). Here is a direct statement from the Epicurean Diogenes of Oinoanda in response to the question "What is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?" -

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into "what is the means of happiness?" and they wanted to say "the virtues" (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not "what is the means of happiness?" but "what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?", I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point.

Also, from Cicero's [On Ends](#), the Epicurean Torquatus says:

*Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of **a life of pleasure**. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the Telos, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the Chief Good is to live agreeably.*

...

*If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that **a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure**.*

To the extent that happiness is identifiable with the best life, Torquatus also provides this description of a life which admits of no further improvement:

The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

For [an article on this issue check here](#), and to [discuss this FAQ response go here](#).

7. Death - How Long Should We Seek To Postpone It?

The observation that pleasure cannot be made more complete than complete (than when we experience nothing but pleasure without any adulteration of pain) leads us to realize that Infinite Time Contains No Greater Pleasure Than A Limited Time. This is because while it is certainly true that pleasure is greater in duration when we live longer, pleasure cannot be made more complete than complete, and duration is not the only factor involved in measuring pleasure. Epicurus wrote to Menoeceus that the wise man at a banquet choose not the most food, but the best, and held that our desire should not be for the longest life, but the most pleasant. The determination of what is "most pleasant" is not an objective measurement, but instead must take into account all circumstances of life, including not only duration but also the intensity and part of the body affected by pleasure and pain. If we take Epicurus' advice to heart, we see that nothing can be made more complete than that which is complete, and that "variation" - or the continuous adding-on of new pleasurable experiences, cannot make our lives more complete any more than continuously adding water to a jar can make the jar hold more water.

Under this topic we discuss the nature of the best life, and the question of How Long Should We Seek To Live?

[Death is Nothing To Us And There Is No Reward Or Punishment After Death](#)

See discussion here: [How Long Should We Seek To Live?](#)

8. Good And Evil

1. All Good And Evil Consists In Sensation
2. There Is No Good But Pleasure
3. There is No Evil But Pain

9. Virtue

9.1. The Nature of Virtue

Virtue Is Not Absolute Or An End in Itself. Virtue Is Not The Same For All People, Times, And Places, And Virtue Is Instrumental To Pleasure Rather Than An End In Itself

9.2. Piety - The Proper Attitude Toward The Gods

9.3. Prudence

9.4. Friendship

9.5. Courage

9.6. Justice

Epicurus held that justice does not exist in the absolute, and that the application of the term "just" or "unjust" to something is dependant upon time, place, and other circumstances. As a result, justice become primarily a social agreement in which the individuals involve agree not to harm each other. Epicurus held that relationships of justice arise naturally due to the pursuit of pleasurable living, and are not defined or handed down by gods or by ideal concepts. Actions which are considered unjust, on the other hand, when they produce concern over retribution and resulting disturbance of peace of mind.

9.7. Honesty

9.8. Confidence

9.9. Benevolence

9.10. Temperance

9.11. Considerateness

9.12. Hope

9.13. Independence And Self Sufficiency

Epicurus advocated that as a practical matter material wealth, fame, and political power, often do not lead to happiness. He therefore advocated for the pursuit of a lifestyle involving self-sufficiency and independence, emphasizing that these provide freedom from the fickleness and dependence on the crowds. Epicurus pointed out that since all aspects of human life which are not painful are pleasurable, pleasure is generally relatively easy to attain and sustain without material wealth, fame, and political power, and that pain is generally relatively easy to avoid or endure.

9.14. Memory And Presence of Mind

9.15. Proper Political And Social Relations

9.16. Gratitude

9.17. Sound Mind

9.18. Sound Body