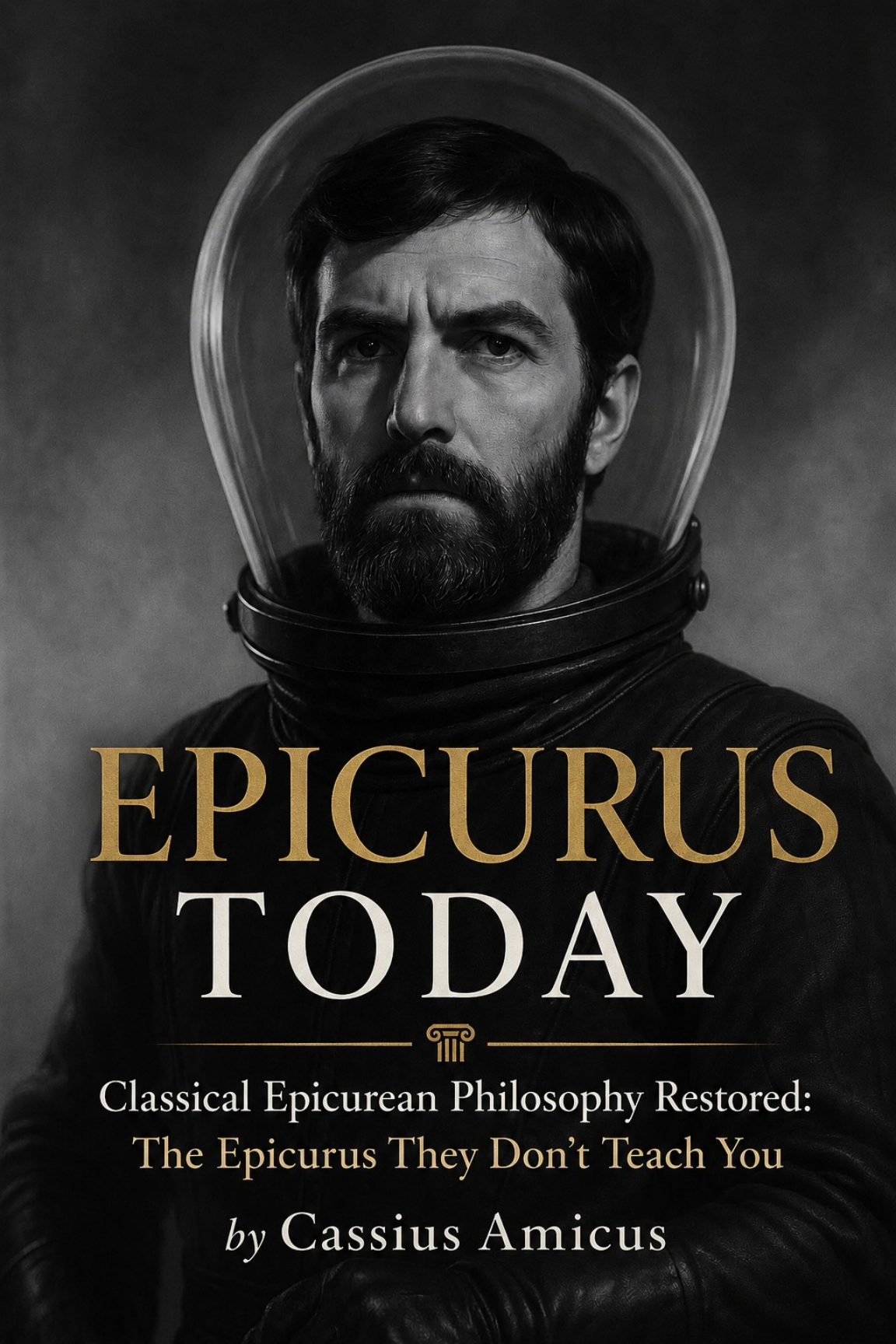


# EPICURUS TODAY

Classical Epicurean Philosophy Restored:
The Epicurus They Don't Teach You

*by* Cassius Amicus

# EPICURUS TODAY

*Classical Epicurean Philosophy Restored*

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The Epicurus They Don't Teach You

*by*

Cassius Amicus

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Chapter drafts were prepared with the assistance of Claude AI. All opinions, editorial decisions and judgments as to content are solely those of Cassius Amicus, who is solely responsible for everything presented here.

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# Preface

This ebook is a collection of key articles first published at EpicurusToday.com. The perspective on Epicurean philosophy presented here incorporates many citations to academic authorities on Epicurus, yet in general it runs counter to the mainstream interpretation of Epicurus generally presented on the internet. This is not accident — it is by design — because EpicurusToday is dedicated to restoring authentic Classical Epicurean Philosophy against centuries of misreading, domestication, and substitution.

Just as with EpicurusToday itself, this epub is the subject of ongoing revision as new research, new formulations, and new arguments are developed. The latest version of every article in this collection is always available at EpicurusToday.com, where much additional supporting material is freely accessible. Readers who wish to ensure they have the most current version of any article are encouraged to check the EpicurusToday website directly.

This collection has emerged from more than ten years of administering EpicureanFriends.com, a community forum dedicated to the study and promotion of Classical Epicurean Philosophy. That ongoing community experience — the questions raised, the misreadings identified, the arguments tested against readers from many backgrounds — has shaped every article here. Comments, corrections, and suggestions for future editions are welcome and can be submitted through the EpicureanFriends.com forum.

You should know at the outset that final drafts of the articles in this collection were prepared with the assistance of Claude AI. All opinions, editorial decisions, selections of source material, and judgments as to content are solely those of Cassius Amicus, who is solely responsible for everything presented here. The use of AI assistance in the preparation of these articles does not diminish and should not be taken to qualify that responsibility in any way. Rather the use of AI has

made possible a much accelerated publication schedule that will allow this material to be accessible to the public much more quickly than would have been possible otherwise.

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## Who Was Epicurus?

Epicurus (341–270 BC) was a Greek philosopher who founded one of the most influential and enduring philosophical schools of the ancient world. After recruiting a network of like-minded friends and colleagues in the provincial areas of Greece, he moved his school to Athens itself, where he taught for decades in a school that came to be known as "the Garden." He was a prolific writer, reportedly composing over 300 works, though nearly all have been lost. What survives – his letters, his Principal Doctrines, and fragments preserved by later writers – is enough to show why he was celebrated by admirers and attacked by enemies with equal intensity for over five hundred years after his death.

Epicurus built his philosophy on three interlocking foundations. The first is natural science: the universe is composed entirely of matter and space, nothing is created from nothing, and there are no supernatural forces governing our lives. The second is a theory of knowledge: our senses, our feelings, and our capacity to recognize patterns, supplemented by practical reason, are fully sufficient to understand the world and guide our lives, without any need for divine revelation or abstract logic disconnected from experience. The third – and most controversial – is ethics: the goal of life is happiness, happiness means a life in which pleasures predominate over pains, and pleasure is what Nature has given every living creature as its primary guide.

These three foundations are not separable. Epicurus was insistent that you cannot understand how to live well until you understand the nature of the universe you live in, and you cannot understand the universe without the right tools for knowing what is true. The philosophy stands as a whole or not at all.

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## What Makes Epicurus Different

Epicurus was not the only ancient philosopher who discussed pleasure, happiness, or the good life. What makes him genuinely different – and genuinely threatening to the traditions that attacked him – is the combination of positions he held, and the confidence with which he held them.

He taught that the universe has no supernatural overlord, no divine plan, and no afterlife in which the good are rewarded and the wicked punished. He taught that the gods – understood correctly as natural, not supernatural, beings – are wholly indifferent to human affairs. He taught that our senses are reliable and that knowledge of reality is achievable. He taught that pleasure, broadly understood as all experience that is not painful, is the beginning and end of the happy life. He taught that virtue matters – not as an end in itself, but as the most important set of tools for living well. And he taught that death is nothing to us, since it is simply the end of sensation, and where there is no sensation, there is neither good nor evil.

Taken together, these positions constitute one of the most thorough and consistent philosophical systems in the ancient world. They were also considered dangerous by the major competing traditions of his own time and the centuries that followed – and they remain controversial today.

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## How Epicurus Has Been Misread

Before going further, there is something important to acknowledge. If you have encountered Epicurus before – in a philosophy class, an article, a popular book – there is a substantial chance that what you read was shaped by one of four traditions that have systematically distorted his philosophy.

**Stoicism** was Epicurus's most direct ancient rival. The Stoics held that virtue alone is the good, that pleasure is at best irrelevant and at worst corrupting, and that the wise man accepts fate with equanimity. Stoic writers – including Seneca, Plutarch, and Cicero in his own voice – wrote extensively about Epicurus, often

in ways that portrayed him as essentially a failed Stoic: someone who used the word "pleasure" but really meant something very like Stoic tranquility. This portrait is dishonest to the texts.

**Platonism** taught that the highest realities are not the things we experience with our senses but abstract, eternal Forms accessible only through pure reason. Platonic philosophy elevates the abstract over the real, demotes the body as a prison of the soul, and treats sensory pleasure as philosophically unworthy. Scholars shaped by Platonic assumptions have consistently read Epicurean pleasure as something more abstract and less embodied than Epicurus actually described.

**Supernatural religion** – above all the Judeo-Christian tradition – treats pleasure as morally suspect, prizes self-denial as a virtue, and promises reward and punishment after death. The caricature of Epicurus as a crude hedonist was already being promoted by Christian apologists in the second century AD, and it has never fully gone away. Reading Epicurus through a framework that assumes bodily pleasure is base and that the highest good is spiritual produces a distorted picture at every point.

**Humanism**, in the broad modern sense, substitutes idealism, rational self-restraint, and service to others for pleasure as the foundational category of ethics. Humanist readings of Epicurus tend to emphasize moderation, civic duty, and the subordination of desire to idealism – importing assumptions that are foreign to Epicurean philosophy and transforming it into something closer to Kantian ethics than to what the texts actually say.

All four of these traditions share one structural feature: each posits a highest good that transcends the natural guidance of pleasure and pain. Whether that highest good is called Virtue, the Form of the Good, God's Will, Rational Dignity, or Good Without God, it is always something other than the pleasure that Nature has actually provided as our guide. Epicurus rejected each of these frameworks completely, and understanding his philosophy requires being willing to examine them critically rather than importing them as unexamined assumptions.

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Epicurus is frequently recommended to people who are looking for a philosophy of tranquility – a kind of non-medical equivalent of a calming agent. Those

people will find something more demanding and more interesting than they expected.

The goal of Epicurean philosophy is not the mere absence of disturbance. It is happiness – a life actively full of pleasure, in which pleasures predominate over pains. Epicurus was clear that we sometimes choose pain and disturbance in order to achieve a greater pleasure, and that a life well lived is not a quiet empty life but one *plena et conferta voluptatibus* – full and crammed with pleasures, as a Roman once described it.

What Epicurus does offer is a framework for pursuing that full life wisely: understanding which desires lead to lasting pleasure and which generate more pain than they are worth; freeing ourselves from irrational fears about gods and death that steal our happiness without cause; and building the friendships and the philosophical understanding that make real happiness durable.

Epicurus also holds positions that many people find genuinely challenging. He rejects the existence of supernatural forces governing our lives. He rejects any kind of fate or divine destiny. He holds that we ourselves – not gods, not fortune, not our circumstances – are primarily responsible for how we live. And he holds that death is simply the end of sensation, with no punishment and no reward waiting on the other side.

Many readers will find these positions liberating. Some will find them uncomfortable. Both reactions are understandable. What we ask is that you engage with the actual texts and arguments rather than the centuries of distortion that have accumulated around them.



## The Core Doctrines of Epicurean Philosophy

Epicurean philosophy is rich and detailed, but its foundations can be stated plainly. The following is a summary of its most important doctrines, organized across its three branches: natural science, the theory of knowledge, and ethics. Each entry below includes links to a full reference page, a collection of key quotations, and a dedicated discussion forum at EpicureanFriends.com.

**Natural Science (Physics)**

1. Nothing Comes From Nothing or Goes To Nothing Supernaturally. *Everything Happens Naturally From The Motion of Atoms Through Space.*Quotations2. The Universe Is Infinite In Size And Eternal In Time And Has No Gods Over It. *There Is No Supernatural Design Or Existence Outside Of Nature.*Quotations3. True Divinity Is Incorruptible And Blessed. *Beings Which Are Divine Do Not Reward Friends And Punish Enemies Or Intervene In Human Affairs.*Quotations4. Death Is Nothing To Us. *When We Die We Cease To Exist.*Quotations5. There Is No Necessity To Live Under the Control of Necessity. *There Is No Fate Or Destiny – We Decide How We Live.*Quotations**The Theory of Knowledge (Canonics)**
2. He Who Says Nothing Can Be Known Knows Nothing. *Knowledge Of Reality Is Possible.*Quotations7. All Sensations Are True. *Error Is In The Mind And Not The Senses.*Quotations8. The Criteria of Truth Are The Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings. *These Natural Faculties Connect Us With Reality.*Quotations9. Dialectical Logic And Radical Skepticism Do Not Determine Truth. *Reasoning Must Be Grounded In The Perceptions Of Our Natural Faculties.*Quotations10. Platonic Ideal Forms, Aristotelian Essences, And Divine Revelation Do Not Exist. *All Truth Exists In This World.*Quotations**Ethics**
3. Happiness Is the Goal of Life. *A Life Of Happiness Is A Life In Which Pleasure Predominates Over Pain.*Quotations12. Pleasure Is the Guide, Beginning, And End Of The Happy Life. *Pleasure Includes Not Just Bodily Stimulation But All Mental And Physical Experience We Find To Be Agreeable.*Quotations13. The Term "Pleasure" Is The Exact Equivalent Of "Absence of Pain." *All Experiences Of Life Are Either Pleasurable Or Painful, With No Middle Ground, So The Presence Of One Means The Absence Of The Other.*Quotations14. Virtue Is Not Absolute Or An End In Itself. *There Is Nothing Good But Pleasure And Nothing Evil But Pain.*Quotations15. Life Is Desirable, But Unlimited Time Contains No Greater Pleasure Than Limited Time. *A Life Full Of Pleasure Can Never Be More Than Full No Matter How Much Time Is Available.*Quotations—

## The Doctrines in Plain Language

The list above gives the skeleton. This section adds the flesh – a plain-language explanation of why each group of doctrines matters and what Epicurus was actually claiming.

## The Physical Foundation: A Universe Without Supernatural Forces

Epicurus began where any honest philosopher must: with the question of what exists. Working from careful observation and rigorous reasoning, he arrived at the conclusion that the universe consists entirely of atoms – indivisible particles of matter – moving through empty space. Everything we observe, from the largest star to the subtlest thought, is a result of atoms combining and separating according to natural laws.

The most important consequence of this is what it rules out. Nothing comes from nothing: the universe has always existed, and there was never a moment when a supernatural creator could have brought it into being from outside. Nothing goes to nothing: matter does not disappear, it recombines. The universe is infinite in both extent and time, which means there is nothing "outside" it and no moment "before" it. And the universe that results from natural atomic motion is not designed, not supervised, and not steered toward any human goal.

This is the foundation on which everything else rests. Epicurus was not an atheist in the modern sense – he held that gods, properly understood as non-supernatural, do exist as natural beings of exceptional happiness and permanence. But no such being created the universe, intervenes in human affairs, rewards the pious, or punishes the wicked. Nature, not divine will, governs what happens.

As Epicurus wrote to Herodotus: *"Nothing is created out of that which does not exist: for if it were, everything would be created out of everything with no need of seeds."*

One thing this picture does not mean – and what critics ancient and modern have consistently gotten wrong – is that understanding the universe as atoms and void drains life of meaning, wonder, or beauty. This objection has been raised against Epicurean philosophy from its earliest days, and it rests on a confu-

sion. The richness of human experience – friendship, love, beauty, intellectual discovery, adventure and achievement, the pleasures of art and music and nature, the deep satisfaction of a life well and bravely lived – does not require a supernatural foundation to be real or valuable. All of it emerges from the natural world. None of it is diminished by understanding its natural origin, any more than a rainbow is less beautiful when you understand how light scatters through water. The FAQ at this site addresses this question directly for those who want to explore it further.

This is in fact one of the most distinctive and positive aspects of Epicurean philosophy: it places the full value of life firmly in the actual world we inhabit, rather than deferring that value to a "true world" beyond experience. There is no need to look past this life, this body, these friends, and these pleasures to find what is genuinely good – they are already it. Lucretius opened his great poem *On the Nature of Things* with a hymn to the creative power of nature itself – not a supernatural deity, but the living natural world that without any divine direction produces the inexhaustible variety and richness of everything that exists. For an Epicurean, the realization that all of this arose naturally, from the eternal motion of matter through space, is not cause for despair but for a deeper and more honest appreciation of what we have actually been given. Epicurean philosophy does not remove the wonder from the universe. It insists that the wonder belongs to this universe – the only one we have and the one we actually inhabit.

Once the physical foundation is clear, Epicurus's treatment of death follows directly. If consciousness is a property of the body – if the soul, like everything else, is composed of atoms that disperse at death – then death is simply the end of sensation. And where there is no sensation, there is neither good nor bad. Death cannot be a misfortune for the one who dies, because there is no one left to experience it.

This is not resignation or indifference. It is liberation. If death is nothing – no punishment, no suffering, no judgment – then the fear of death that poisons so much of human life is irrational, and we are free to pursue happiness without that shadow. More than that: the knowledge that we have only this life, with no second chance and no supernatural rescue, is a powerful spur to live it fully and wisely now.

> *"Death is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not."* – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

## No Fate, No Destiny – We Are Responsible for Our Lives

Epicurus identified two belief systems as especially destructive to human happiness. The first is determinism – the view that everything is fixed by prior causes, that fate or necessity governs all events, and that we have no genuine control over our lives. The second is its cousin, radical skepticism – the view that nothing can be known with confidence, that the senses deceive us, and that certainty is impossible.

Both are self-refuting, and Epicurus said so bluntly. The determinist who claims everything happens by necessity cannot criticize anyone who disagrees, since that disagreement is also happening by necessity. The skeptic who claims nothing can be known is claiming to know that nothing can be known. These positions destroy themselves on examination.

Against both, Epicurus held that our natural faculties – our senses, our feelings, and our capacity to reason from experience – are fully sufficient for genuine knowledge, and that we are genuinely free to make choices that shape our lives. This is not wishful thinking. It is grounded in the physics of the swerve – the spontaneous deviation in atomic motion that breaks strict mechanical causation – and in the observable fact that we deliberate, decide, and act on our deliberations every day.

## Virtue: A Tool, Not an End

Epicurus did not dismiss virtue. He redirected it. Courage, honesty, justice, prudence, friendship – these matter enormously in Epicurean philosophy. But they matter as means, not as ends. Virtue is the most important set of tools for living a happy life. It is not itself the definition of happiness, it is not its own reward, and it is not absolute or universal in its specific requirements.

The Stoics held that virtue alone is the good and that a virtuous person is happy even on the rack. Epicurus found this doctrine not merely wrong but dishonest – a verbal trick that calls a life of suffering "happy" by redefining words rather than by actually producing the pleasures that make life worth living. Virtue mat-

ters because it produces pleasure and prevents pain. When it ceases to do that in a given context, its authority ends.

> *"It is not possible to live pleasurably without living prudently and honourably and justly, and it is impossible to live prudently and honourably and justly without living pleasurably."* – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 5

## Pleasure: The Goal, the Guide, and the Standard

This is the doctrine that has generated the most controversy and the most misrepresentation, so it deserves the most careful statement.

Epicurus held that Nature has given every living creature exactly two internal guides: pleasure and pain. These two cover the entire field of feeling. There is no neutral third state between them. If you are alive and conscious and not in pain, you are in a state of pleasure – not waiting for pleasure to begin, but already in it.

This is a much broader claim about pleasure than the ordinary one. Pleasure in Epicurean terms is not limited to vivid sensory stimulation. It also includes rest, calm, the enjoyment of friendship, intellectual engagement, the memory of past goods, the confident anticipation of future goods, and the full range of normal healthy conscious experience. Every experience of life that is not painful is pleasurable. "Absence of pain" is therefore not a separate, lesser condition below pleasure – it is pleasure, described from the negative side.

This also means that Epicurus was not teaching minimalism or austerity. The goal is not to want as little as possible. The goal is a life as full as possible with pleasures of all kinds – bodily and mental, active and restful, immediate and anticipated. Two Roman Epicureans preserved the description perfectly: Cicero's Epicurean spokesman Torquatus described the goal as *"numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind,"* and another Roman source described the Epicurean ideal as *nihil esse praestabilius otiosa vita, plena et conferta voluptatibus* – nothing preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures. Torquatus's full speech – the fullest, clearest connected exposition of Epicurean ethics to survive from antiquity – works through exactly this argument at length, and is the recommended starting point for new readers (see the note further down this page).

What reason does in this framework is help us choose wisely among pleasures – identifying which desires lead to genuine and lasting pleasure and which, though pleasant in the moment, generate more pain than they are worth. Reason serves pleasure. It does not replace it.

> *"For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear... Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life."* – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

## How Epicurus Used Terms Differently

One of the greatest sources of confusion in reading Epicurus is that he used several important terms in ways that departed sharply from common usage – not arbitrarily, but for precise philosophical reasons. The three most important are:

**"Gods"** – Epicurus used this term to mean beings that are genuinely blessed and imperishable: fully happy, fully deathless, entirely free from fear, anxiety, and need. Such beings do not intervene in human affairs, because a truly blessed being has no reason to concern itself with others' troubles. This is not atheism – it is a positive account of what genuine divinity must be like. As Epicurus wrote, "the impious man is not he who denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many."

**"Virtue"** – Epicurus used this term to mean the practical tools of living well: prudence, justice, courage, friendship, and the others. These are real and important, but they are means to pleasure, not ends in themselves. There is no absolute, universal virtue handed down by divine command or derived from abstract logic. What is virtuous is what actually produces happiness in the relevant circumstances.

**"Pleasure"** – As described above, Epicurus used this term to mean all experience of life that is not painful. This is a broader and more positive claim than ordinary usage suggests. The full philosophical argument for why this extension of the term is not a word game but a genuine insight is developed in the companion articles The Norm Is Pleasure Too and Two Names For One Reality.

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## An Invitation

Near the end of his life, an Epicurean named Diogenes of Oinoanda carved a large stone inscription on a wall in the public square of his city in ancient Lycia, so that all passersby – including generations not yet born – could read his summary of Epicurean philosophy. He explained his purpose in the inscription itself:

> *"Having already reached the sunset of my life, being almost on the verge of departure from the world on account of old age, I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure."*

That is what Epicurean philosophy offers: not a preparation for death, not a quieting of desire, not a retreat from life – but an anthem to the fullness of pleasure, composed by someone who had understood what that fullness meant and wanted to share it with anyone willing to read.

If that is the kind of philosophy you are looking for, you are in the right place.

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# Part One: Introduction

# How This Book Is Organized

## How This Book Is Organized

This collection is organized in six parts, following the structure of EpicurusToday.com itself. Epicurean philosophy is an integrated system — physics, canonics, and ethics are not independent departments but three aspects of a single coherent account of the world and how to live in it. The arrangement reflects this integration: the opening articles establish the perspective and the stakes, the physics, divinity, and canonics articles build the foundation, and the ethics articles apply what has been established to the practical question of how to live.

Readers who are new to Epicurean philosophy are encouraged to begin with Part One and follow the progression in order. Those who come with a specific question — about pleasure and pain, about knowledge and certainty, about how Epicurus relates to Stoicism or Buddhism — may find the summaries below useful for navigating directly to the relevant section.

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## Part One: Introduction

The opening articles establish who Epicurus actually was, why he matters, and why the version of his philosophy most commonly encountered today is a distortion of the original. This is necessary ground-clearing before the philosophy itself can be presented fairly.

**Welcome to EpicurusToday.com** introduces the three foundational branches of Epicurean philosophy — physics (the nature of things), canonics (the nature of knowledge), and ethics (the nature of the good life) — and presents a plain-lan-

guage summary of the fifteen core principles, the four adulterating traditions (Stoicism, Platonism, supernatural religion, and Humanism), and the most important doctrines. New readers should start here.

**Why This Matters: The EpicurusToday Perspective** identifies the core problem as domestication — the transformation of one of the most vital and combative philosophers in the ancient world into a patron saint of comfortable withdrawal — and traces the tradition of misreading through specific historical sources. The article presents the combative Epicurus whose philosophy produced real action in the world, and states the five principles that animate this project.

**Epicurus in the Modern World** explains how Epicurean philosophy relates to the most common modern philosophical and religious frameworks — Stoicism, Humanism, religion, Buddhism, and Libertarianism — with specific attention to what adherents of those frameworks need to understand about Epicurus if they are to engage with his philosophy honestly.

**The Tetrapharmakon: Why Using It as a Summary Gets Everything Wrong** examines the four-line passage that has become the most widely cited "summary" of Epicurean philosophy, despite not coming from Epicurus, not appearing in any intact ancient Epicurean text, and — most critically — not containing the word pleasure anywhere. The article shows why this passage has done more damage to the accurate reception of Epicurean philosophy than almost any other single document.

**A Tribute to Norman DeWitt** introduces the scholar whose 1954 work *Epicurus and His Philosophy* directly inspired this project — explaining who he was, why he is rarely cited by modern academic commentators, what makes the book extraordinary, and why his first-chapter warning (that Epicurus was simultaneously the most revered and most reviled philosopher in the Graeco-Roman world) is the methodological foundation that every reader of Epicurean scholarship needs.

**About the Content of EpicurusToday.com** explains plainly how this site's content is produced and maintained: curated and editorially approved by Cassius Amicus, assisted by AI in the drafting, grounded in more than a decade of primary-source engagement and community discussion at Epicurean-

Friends.com, subject to ongoing correction, and published without waiting for perfection because the urgency of the project demands it.

**Jefferson's Epicurus: How America's Philosopher-President Embodied the Fifteen Core Doctrines** demonstrates that the domestication of Epicurus was not inevitable. Jefferson stated plainly in 1819: "I too am an Epicurean" — and meant it. The article walks through all fifteen core doctrines in order across Physics, Canonics, and Ethics, showing from Jefferson's own letters that he understood and endorsed each one: matter, void, and motion as the complete physical ontology; "to talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings"; the gods as blessed beings who do not meddle in human affairs; the "consolations of a sound philosophy equally indifferent to hope and fear" regarding death; the Syllabus's "Man is a free agent"; rejection of Pyrrhonism by name; the moral sense as a natural faculty given to all humans (the ploughman reasons as well as the professor); utility as the test of virtue; the pursuit of happiness as the Declaration's deliberate Epicurean choice; and the "ripeness of time for death" as the Epicurean attitude toward life's finite duration.

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## Part Two: Physics

Epicurean physics is not a curiosity of ancient scientific history. It is the foundation on which everything else rests. The Epicurean argument that the universe is composed of atoms and void, that nothing comes from nothing and nothing goes to nothing, that the universe was not created and is not governed by supernatural forces — these are not speculative cosmological claims that can be separated from the ethics. They are the ground on which the ethical program stands, and without them the ethics has no foundation.

**The Continuing Vitality of Epicurean Physics** is the main analytical article, examining how the foundational doctrines of Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus* and Lucretius' *On The Nature of Things* hold up against both ancient objections and modern science. It argues that Epicurean physics functions as a set of guardrails against specific philosophical errors rather than a claim to have all the scientific answers.

**Against the Geometers** examines Epicurus's systematic rejection of philosophical claims based on abstract geometricy — points without dimension, lines without width — and his alternative doctrine of minimum parts as the smallest physically real unit. The article shows how observations still viable in modern physics continue to vindicate the Epicurean position.

**Epicurean Response to Idealism** addresses the Epicurean rejection of philosophical idealism in all its forms — Platonic, Kantian, Hegelian — showing why Epicurus insisted that the physical world of sensation is the only real world and how this rejection applies to the most sophisticated modern descendants of ancient idealism.

**Truth and Reality Does Not Require Being Eternally the Same** addresses the often unstated Platonic and Stoic requirement that genuine reality must be eternal and unchanging, and shows why Epicurus rejected this as false to the nature of things. The article has direct implications for understanding why pleasure can be impermanent yet genuinely the highest good.

**Epicurus Against Aristotle on Atomism** examines Aristotle's philosophical critique of atomism and the precise way Epicurus responded, showing how Epicurus transcended Democritus on this crucial aspect of atomic theory.

**Emergence in Epicurean Philosophy** addresses the problem of how the complexity and majesty of the world around us can really have had its origin in atoms and void. Here we show how Epicurean physics explains the emergence of the rich observable world from atoms and void — how properties absent from individual atoms (color, sound, life, happiness) are genuinely real as properties of the compounds atoms form. Thomas Jefferson's 1820 letter to John Adams appears here as an independent restatement of the Epicurean emergentist position.

**Epicurean Physics and Modern Science: Five Core Claims That Endure** defends five foundational Epicurean positions against the standard dismissal that modern science has rendered them obsolete. The article distinguishes the logical framework — what must be true of any coherent account of nature — from the empirical details Epicurus explicitly left open as beyond the resolving power of ancient instruments. The five positions: that matter cannot be infinitely divisible without generating Zenonian absurdities about finite quantities and finite motion; that matter and void must both be infinite in extent because finite alternat-

ives produce a universe either dispersed beyond combination or packed beyond motion; that the universe as a whole has no beginning or end because nothing comes from nothing and nothing goes to nothing (claims about the total universe that the Big Bang, a claim about our local observable region, does not touch); that perception works through particles in contact, confirmed in detail by modern optics and sensory biology; and that the gods are blessed and imperishable — on Norman DeWitt's reading, imperishable through their manner of living rather than by metaphysical necessity, making them consistent with Epicurean physics and genuine exemplars of the philosophical life at its highest.

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## Part Three: Divinity

Epicurus taught that the gods exist, that they are natural beings who live in complete happiness, and that they neither made the world for us nor govern it. Few parts of the philosophy have been more badly misreported. Ancient critics called Epicurus an atheist in disguise, and modern writers have turned him into one by attaching his name to arguments he never made. The articles in this part set out what Epicurus actually held about divinity and answer the arguments most often used to misrepresent him.

**The Intelligent Design Argument** traces the design argument – a foundation of most modern religion – from its Pre-Socratic origins through Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Here we present the systematic Epicurean refutation — logical, canonical, physical, and ethical — showing how Lucretius's proto-selectionist account of biological organization anticipates aspects of Darwin, and why the Epicurean response remains as relevant to modern design arguments as to ancient ones.

**The "Epicurean Paradox" Is Not Epicurean** summarizes and recommends an excellent article by Eikadistes of the Society of Friends of Epicurus. It traces the famous riddle about God and evil backward through David Hume and Lactantius to the skeptic Sextus Empiricus, shows that Epicurus held the gods exist and are clearly known, and explains how Sextus misunderstood the Epicurean gods. It adds an important distinction: the Epicureans did argue from the evils of the world against divine providence and government of the world, as Lucretius does

in Books Two and Five, but they never used that argument to deny that the gods exist. The skeptics, and later Hume, turned an argument against providence into an argument against divinity itself.

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## Part Four: Canonics

Canonics — the Epicurean theory of how knowledge is possible and what its sources are — is the least-discussed branch of the philosophy in popular treatments and yet one of the most important. Without a sound account of how we know anything, neither the physics nor the ethics can be defended. Epicurus was among the first philosophers to place the question of knowledge on a fully evidence-based footing, and his answer to the Skeptics who said that reliable knowledge was impossible is as relevant now as it was in the third century BC.

**Beyond the Monkees: How Epicurus Adds Color to Shades of Gray** is the accessible entry point for this section, using the Monkees' 1967 song — a lament for lost certainty — as the entry point for explaining why the Epicurean Canon matters in practice. The article works through the song's lost distinctions (right from wrong, truth from lies, the foolish from the wise) and shows, with primary source quotations, how the Epicurean Canon restores the capacity for reliable judgment that the Skeptical tradition has taken away.

**Canonics — Knowledge for the Only Real World** is the main analytical article, examining in depth how the three criteria of truth operate (sensation, anticipations, and feelings of pleasure and pain), why all sensations are held to be true while judgments about sensations can be false, and how the canonical standard functions as a guardrail against specific philosophical errors throughout the Epicurean system.

**Two Roads to Truth — Epicurean vs. Stoic Epistemology** examines why the Stoic account of knowledge — which grounds certainty in the faculty of reason rather than in sensation — leads to the specific errors that Epicurus identified, and why the Epicurean account is superior on philosophical, practical, and historical grounds.

**The "Academic Questions" Behind Evaluation Of Pleasure and Happiness** argues that Cicero's dispute with Lucullus over whether the senses can deliver real knowledge is the same fight Plato had already picked against pleasure in the *Philebus* and *Republic* Book Nine — because Plato's claim that only the unchanging realm of Being can be truly known, while the senses and the whole physical world belong to mere Becoming, is what forces him to demote ordinary felt pleasure beneath a rarer, intellect-only happiness available only to the philosopher. Drawing on Kelly Arenson's *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus*, the article works through the "shadow-paintings" argument, the Being/Becoming "filling" passage, and the (Arenson-doubted) calculation that the philosopher-king lives 729 times more pleasantly than the tyrant, then shows how Cicero's own closing survey in *Academic Questions* puts Plato's epistemology on the table beside Epicurus's, the Cyrenaics', and Protagoras's — and how Epicurus's refusal to doubt the senses in the first place is what makes full happiness available to everyone, not only to the rare philosophically trained few.

**Epicurus Against The White Flags of Surrender: Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonists** treats the two distinct ancient skeptical traditions that Epicurus opposed — Academic Skepticism and the more radical Pyrrhonism. It explains why these are not the same tradition, traces Pyrrhonism's roots from Pyrrho's encounter with Indian gymnosophists through to Sextus Empiricus's systematic *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* five centuries later, and addresses a common modern confusion: the name "Sextus Empiricus" sounds like it describes a philosopher sympathetic to sensation-based knowledge, but the "Empiricus" label comes from his membership in the Empiric school of ancient medicine and has nothing to do with his Pyrrhonist philosophy, which denied the possibility of any reliable sensory knowledge. The article closes by following the Pyrrhonist program to its logical destination — inaction, nihilism, and the wasted life — and argues that the modern habit of describing Epicurus's goal as "ataraxia" rather than pleasure directly enables confusion with Pyrrhonism, since both traditions used the identical term for completely opposed ends.

**In An AI World, The Epicurean View of Knowledge Is More Important Than Ever** applies the Epicurean Canon directly to the most urgent practical challenge of the modern era: the proliferation of AI-generated synthetic media that makes it increasingly difficult to trust what we see and hear. The article

maps the ancient three-way debate directly onto the three responses available today — Skeptic despair (nothing can be trusted), Stoic-style certification (some authority can verify genuine from synthetic), and the Epicurean position (all sensations report accurately, and truth and falsehood reside in what the mind adds). It presents the three natural criteria in detail and closes by arguing that no advance in AI changes the fundamental Epicurean point: the tools for detecting deception are natural, universal, and available to every human being without philosophical training or technological certification.

**Twins, Eggs, and Duplicate Worlds: How Epicurus Deals With Identical Things** takes up one of the oldest attacks on knowledge: if two things can look exactly alike, how can the senses ever be trusted? Drawing on Cicero's *Academic Questions*, it shows that the Stoics staked their theory of knowledge on the claim that no two things in nature are ever identical, a uniqueness they credited to the divine Creator, and that the Academic skeptics broke that claim with twins, eggs, and identical statues. Epicurean physics takes the opposite view. With a limited number of atomic shapes, unlimited atoms, and infinite worlds, duplicates are rare in any one place but innumerable in total. The article explains why this does no damage to Epicurean canonics: an identical thing is not the same thing, as Lucretius shows in Book Three, and identical sensations are still true sensations, because the judgment of sameness belongs to opinion, which is tested by further evidence. As Cicero himself records, Epicurus rejected the premise that some perceptions are false, and that is why the twins argument trapped the Stoics and never touched him.

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## Part Five: Ethics

The ethics articles are the heart of the collection. They address directly the question of how to live — what the goal of life is, what pleasure and pain actually are, how to navigate the specific distortions that have accumulated around Epicurean ethics over twenty-three centuries, and what authentic Epicurean engagement with the world looks like in practice.

**Which Comes First — Pleasure or Truth? How Epicurus Built His Philosophy** addresses the foundational question of whether Epicurus arbitrarily de-

cided to pursue pleasure and then constructed a system to justify it, or whether he arrived at pleasure as the goal through honest investigation of the universe. Beginning with the ancient account of the young Epicurus challenging his teachers on where Chaos came from when they read Hesiod, the article traces the logical path from cosmological inquiry through atomic physics and the Canon to the ethics of pleasure. It shows that truth comes first — and that what truth, honestly pursued, turns out to deliver is pleasure. The article addresses when pain serves pleasure (the dentist, surgeon, soldier), the Lucretian point that a systematic framework reliable enough to navigate by is all that is required rather than a theory of everything, and Usener Fragment 469 (preserved by Stobaeus) as the crystallization of the argument: Nature has made what is necessary easy to acquire and what is difficult unnecessary.

**The Epicurean Goal Is Happiness Through Pleasure — Not Ataraxia** attacks the most pervasive single misidentification in modern Epicurean scholarship: the claim that the Epicurean goal is *ataraxia* (tranquility, freedom from disturbance) rather than pleasure. The article shows why this is wrong both textually and philosophically, and what difference it makes.

**Happiness (Eudaimonia) in Epicurean Philosophy** examines the relationship between pleasure, happiness, and the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, showing why Epicurean happiness is not the quiet contentment of the successful minimalist but the full and active engagement with every genuine good that a human life can reach for.

**The Perfect and the Good** examines the Epicurean view of the relationship often described as the tension between "the perfect" and "the good" - and whether the two are enemies or friends. He we examine the relationship between perfect pleasure (the full cup) and the good pleasures available in any given moment, and why the Epicurean does not wait for perfection before claiming what is genuinely good.

**How Is the Wise Epicurean Always Happy** addresses the apparent paradox: if pleasure is the goal and pain is real, how can Epicurus claim that the wise man is happy even under torture? The article resolves the paradox through the Epicurean account of how pleasures and pains in different parts of life interact, and what it means for pleasure to predominate.

**Guilty As Charged: Cicero's Deceit** examines the most important ancient attack on Epicurean pleasure — Cicero's philosophical dialogue *De Finibus* — and shows systematically how Cicero misrepresented the Epicurean position, what his actual philosophical disagreements were, and why his attack has been so influential in shaping the distorted reception of Epicurus that this collection is dedicated to correcting.

**Two Names, One Reality** establishes the fundamental point that "pleasure" and "absence of pain" are interchangeable terms in Epicurean philosophy — not two different things, one positive and one negative, but two names for the same condition described from different angles. This single clarification dissolves a large number of the apparent contradictions in Epicurean ethics.

**Why It Is Incorrect to Say Epicurean Philosophy Is Primarily About "Absence of Pain"** collects nine mutually reinforcing arguments — in condensed bullet-point form — against the reduction of Epicurean philosophy to the goal of "absence of pain." The arguments range from the foundational (there are only two feelings, so absence of one is presence of the other) through the textual (the *Letter to Menoeceus* as a whole says the opposite of what the "absence of pain" reading requires; Principal Doctrine 3 is a targeted response to Plato, not a summary of Epicurean ethics; Epicurus stated explicitly what he could not conceive the good without) through the historical (every ancient witness, friendly and hostile alike, describes the goal as active, vivid pleasure) and the practical (the friendship argument; the systematic misreading that "absence of pain" produces when presented without context). The article is organized for ready reference, with each argument clearly labeled so that any individual point can be quickly located and used.

**Too Long Unpraised And Unappreciated - Aulus Gellius And The Clearest Ancient Testimony That Absence of Pain Means Nothing More Than Pleasure** examines Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights* 2.6, where a disinterested Roman grammarian, defending a word choice in Virgil, quotes Epicurus's own definition of "the utmost height of pleasure" as "the removal of all that pains" as an incidental example of a well-known rhetorical principle: total negation of a bad thing is not a weak or middling condition but the strongest possible affirmation of its opposite. Because Gellius has no philosophical stake in Epicurean ethics,

his testimony shows that educated Romans of his day read Epicurus's formula as a straightforward statement of identity, not as a gesture toward some separate, non-sensory condition — a reading independently confirmed by Torquatus's answer to Cicero in Book Two of *On Ends*, that absence of pain is "clearly the same" as pleasure, "and indeed the greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be."

**You Already Understand That Fearlessness Refers To Courageous Bodily and Mental Actions - Why Don't You Realize That Painlessness Refers To Bodily And Mental Pleasures?** opens with a simple test: nobody hears "fearless," "flawless," or "blameless" and pictures a coward, a mediocrity, or a barely-acceptable life — the total absence of a bad thing states the ceiling of its opposite, not a weak or hollow version of it. Aulus Gellius applied this exact principle to Epicurus's own words eighteen hundred years ago, and Torquatus defended the identical identity under hostile cross-examination in Cicero's *On Ends* — evidence this article draws out in full before turning to the assumption that leads so many modern readers to apply the opposite rule to "absence of pain," an assumption traceable to Buddhism, Stoicism, Nihilism, and a general modern suspicion of pleasure. Drawing further on the "corpse problem" ancient Cyrenaic critics and modern scholars alike have had to answer, and on the vigorous Greek heroic ideal of Homer's Odysseus (topical again with Christopher Nolan's 2026 film), the article argues that the corpse reading is not a defensible scholarly position but an insult to Epicurus and to the civilization that produced him. It then goes a step further: even once "absence of pain" is correctly read as pleasure's ceiling, it still does not answer *which* pleasures — a question the traditional Greco-Roman picture of the good life "as a god among men" answers as actively, variously, and vividly as circumstances allow. A closing section traces this same corrective mission through the "Not NeoEpicurean, But Epicurean" statement in the Community Standards.

**Two and Only Two: The Binary Analysis of Pleasure and Pain — and What It Tells Us About the Best Life** develops the full Epicurean binary argument in two stages. The first establishes that pleasure and pain are the only two feelings, jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive — applying Sedley's four-stage analytical method in parallel to Epicurean physics and ethics, explaining why this conclusion required philosophy rather than mere observation (DeWitt on the exten-

sion of "pleasure" to the normal, unstimulated state), and tracing the historical opposition from the Cyrenaics and Plato. Ancient and modern illustrations make the logical structure immediately recognizable. The second stage addresses what the binary does and does not prescribe: PD3 marks the limit of pleasure, not the contents of the best life; and "the most pleasant" (*Letter to Menoeceus* [127]) is a superlative quality of life, not a comparative instruction to always seek more — which is precisely what answers Plato's challenge. A closing section connects both stages to the canonics (senses, anticipations, and feelings) as the instruments for navigating within the territory the binary defines.

**The EpicureanFriends Editorial Policy Against Katastematic Supremacy** argues against the widespread claim that Epicurus divided pleasure into two ranked kinds — a lesser "kinetic" pleasure of the senses and a supreme, static "katastematic" pleasure of freedom from pain — a reading that opens the door to recasting the Epicurean goal as tranquility rather than pleasure. Drawing on Cicero's own inconsistent use of "motion" in *De Finibus*, on his test case of Hieronymus of Rhodes (a genuine "absence of pain" philosopher whom Cicero repeatedly distinguishes from Epicurus), and on the scholarship of Gosling and Taylor (1982) and Nikolsky (2001), the article shows that Epicurus described one pleasure from different angles rather than two pleasures in a hierarchy. It closes by stating the resulting editorial policy of EpicureanFriends.com toward forum advocacy for the katastematic-supremacy reading.

**Tranquillism: The Aftermath of a Century of Scholars Who Alleged That Epicurus' Supreme Good Was Not Pleasure** is a rigorously sourced, continually-growing catalog of scholars — academic and popular-press alike — who characterize Epicurus's goal of life as ataraxia or tranquility rather than pleasure, each entry backed by a quotation checked directly against its primary source with an exact page or location, never a paraphrase or secondhand summary. It leads with Martha Nussbaum, James Warren, and Tim O'Keefe (who proposes, across a monograph, a peer-reviewed handbook chapter, and an encyclopedia entry, that "tranquillist" is a more accurate label for Epicurus than "hedonist"), continues through David Konstan, Stephen Rosenbaum, Ken Binmore, and Alex Voorhoeve, and documents the same substitution in mainstream publications and Wikipedia's own "Epicureanism" article. A closing section catalogs the scholars who have pushed back — Gosling and Taylor, Nikolsky, David Sedley,

Kelly Arenson, Emily Austin, Catherine Wilson, R.W. Sharples, Gisela Striker, Pascal Massie, and Julia Annas.

**The True Width and Depth of Epicurean Pleasure** opens with Cicero's demand to know what pleasure Torquatus could possibly derive from literature, history, and poetry — a charge already refuted elsewhere on the site, but treated here as a template rather than a one-off lie. The article maps the true range of Epicurean pleasure — bodily, mental, emotional, intellectual, social — and its true ranking, showing from Epicurus's own words (including his statement that his own greatest peace came from the investigation of nature, and his deathbed letter to Idomeneus) that mental and intellectual pleasure repeatedly outrank bodily pleasure of the moment in his own accounting. It traces the popular "hedonist" stereotype to Epicurus's actual ancient rival, Aristippus and the Cyrenaics, and closes by showing how the same false narrowing of Epicurean pleasure has been reused by Stoic, Christian, and modern critics alike.

**Living For The Pleasures Of The Moment Isn't Epicurean — It's Lunacy** takes on the popular image of Epicurus head-on, for a general audience: the idea that he taught people to chase bodily pleasure in the moment without regard for consequences. Working entirely from Epicurus's own words in the *Letter to Menoeceus* and from Torquatus's defense of Epicurean ethics in Cicero's *On Ends* — including the "Lorem Ipsum" passage, whose scrambled Latin is drawn from exactly this argument — the article shows that Epicurus explicitly rejected "continuous drinkings and revelings," insisted that every pleasure be weighed against its consequences, taught that the goal is the *best* life rather than the *most* sensation, ranked prudence above philosophy itself, and that Torquatus himself said Epicureans hold the pleasure-of-the-moment crowd in contempt. The conclusion: by the popular definition of "hedonist," Epicurus was one of the least hedonistic philosophers of the ancient world.

**The Full Cup Model** presents the metaphor of the cup or vessel — pleasure fills the cup, the full cup is the limit of pleasure, the project is to fill it — as the key to understanding Principal Doctrine 3 and the relationship between the removal of pain and the achievement of positive pleasure.

**The Norm Is Pleasure Too** shows why Epicurus was right to describe the normal, undisturbed state of a healthy body and mind as itself a form of pleasure,

against the objection that pleasure requires some positive stimulation beyond the mere absence of pain.

**Natural Justice** presents the Epicurean account of justice as a natural compact rather than a divine ordinance or a Platonic Form, and shows why this account is more defensible — and more practically useful — than its Platonic, Stoic, Humanist, or Libertarian alternatives.

**The Epicurean View of Love And Hate - Not Opposites But Complements** examines the Epicurean treatment of love and hate as natural responses to the genuine characteristics of people and things, against both the Stoic counsel of indifference and the sentimental view that all genuine love excludes all hatred.

**Not a Bunker But a Camp** refutes the stereotype of the Epicurean as an apolitical recluse, showing that the Epicurean counsel of selective withdrawal from unnecessary entanglements is quite different from wholesale disengagement, and that the most thoroughly Epicurean figures in ancient history were people of vigorous engagement with the world.

**The Half-Full Cup: How the Gospel of "Enough" Has Corrupted the World's Most Vital Philosophy** is the most direct assault on the most pervasive modern corruption of Epicurean philosophy: the claim that Epicurus teaches us to want less, accept what we have, and find peace in enough. The article names this as a deliberate adulteration and dismantles it on philosophical, textual, and empirical grounds.

**Stiff Upper Lip? Wrong Philosopher** refutes the recruitment of Epicurus as the philosopher of acceptance, endurance, and graceful decline — showing that this is Stoicism with Epicurus's name on it, and that the real Epicurus laughed at fate, rejected hard determinism more fiercely than almost any other ancient philosopher, and built his ethics on the foundation of genuine free will.

**Venus, Reason, and the Full Cup: The Epicurean Philosophy of Sex, Love, and Marriage** attacks the ascetic caricature of Epicurus across every front where it appears in the domain of sexual and romantic life. Opening with Lucretius's invocation of Venus as a deliberate philosophical statement about the naturalness and importance of the drive toward union and procreation, the article establishes sexual desire, romantic love, and the desire for children as natural de-

sires corresponding to genuine goods — not temptations to be managed. It examines Lucretius's Book IV treatment of love in detail, distinguishing the genuine pleasure of sexual union from the specific pathology of obsessive passion that clouds judgment. The disputed Diogenes Laertius passage on marriage is examined with all translations laid out, and the will of Epicurus — providing for Metrodorus's daughter's marriage — identified as the decisive evidence. Epicurus's warning about promiscuity is correctly contextualized as a cost-benefit judgment, not a general indictment of sexual pleasure. The article addresses Epicurus's distinction from the pederastic tradition of the Platonic schools, demolishes the celibacy slander as a product of the hostile commentary tradition, and closes with the positive Epicurean case for marriage and children as genuine goods that the honest calculation of pleasure and pain strongly endorses for most people.

**Was Epicurus a Psychological Hedonist, an Ethical Hedonist, Both, or Neither?** addresses one of the most formally contested questions in Epicurean scholarship — debated directly in the EpicureanFriends.com community and in the academic literature since at least John Cooper's 1999 paper. The article defines the two positions precisely: psychological hedonism as the descriptive claim that all human beings inevitably pursue pleasure whether they admit it or not; ethical hedonism as the normative claim that pleasure *ought* to be the goal and that philosophy is necessary precisely because people can and do choose otherwise. The main scholarly positions are surveyed with their best arguments: Cooper and Waggle for the ethical reading, Woolf and Austin for the psychological. The central evidence — the cradle argument, Principal Doctrine 25, and the prescriptive language throughout the *Letter to Menoeceus* — is examined in detail, with particular attention to what the appeal to infant and animal behavior actually proves. The EpicurusToday conclusion is that Epicurus was primarily an ethical hedonist who used the cradle argument as naturalistic grounding for a normative claim: pleasure is the right standard because nature itself has identified it as the natural good. The psychological hedonist reading, while containing a partial truth about the authority of the feelings as natural criteria, collapses when pushed to its full implications into either a tautology or a form of covert determinism incompatible with the genuine agency that the entire Epicurean practical program presupposes.

**Epicurus and the Pleasure of Rebelling Against Plato** argues, drawing heavily on Norman DeWitt's 1954 *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, that Epicurean philosophy was constructed from the ground up as a deliberate, systematic rebellion against Plato — not a handful of scattered disagreements but a single organizing principle running through physics, canonics, and ethics alike. The article traces specific points of rebellion in each domain: atoms and void against the demiurge and the Forms; the senses-based Canon against the Divided Line and the Cave; pleasure as the unified goal of life against Plato's tripartite soul, the myth of metals, and the doctrine that virtue is intrinsically good. DeWitt's thesis is backed by independent scholarly agreement — Paul Shorey (1901), David Sedley, David Konstan, Boris Nikolsky, Martha Nussbaum, and the ancient commentator Damascius — with the argument that this thesis, though decades old, was largely ignored until recently revived by popular writers like Kelly Arenson and Emily Austin. Throughout, the article insists that Epicurean pleasure is not the narrow, transactional thing of popular caricature (a good meal, a warm bath) but the felt weight of what a person actually values — and that seeing through Plato's false doctrine, for oneself and for one's friends, is itself a genuine exercise of that pleasure, not a grim detour on the way to it.

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## Part Six: Additional Topics

The final section collects articles that address specific aspects of Epicurean philosophy — its historical context, its relationship to figures and movements outside the main philosophical schools, and its practical application in the modern world.

**Mind Viruses Cured By Epicurean Philosophy** examines how certain philosophical and cultural ideas function as self-reinforcing belief systems that resist correction and generate unnecessary pain — and how the Epicurean Canon, with its insistence on sensation and experience as the standard of truth, provides the most effective available cure for the most common and most damaging of these idea-viruses.

**In the Arena: The Locations of the Garden and House of Epicurus** uses the archaeological and historical record of where Epicurus actually lived and taught

to refute the recluse myth at its most literal level: the Garden was not a retreat from Athens but was located adjacent to the city gates, making it as much a gateway into philosophical community as a withdrawal from civic life.

**In Troubled Times, Why Young People Should Turn to Epicurus Rather Than to the Pope** argues the case for Epicurean philosophy as the most relevant and most honest framework available to young people confronting the uncertainties of the modern world, against the appeal of authoritarian religious certainty.

**Two Epicurean Generals** studies Torquatus and Velleius — the two most prominent ancient Roman defenders of Epicurean philosophy in Cicero's dialogues — as historical exemplars of what it looks like to hold and advocate Epicurean commitments in a world dominated by competing philosophical and political pressures.

**Commentary on the Doctrines of Epicurus** provides detailed running commentary on the Principal Doctrines and Vatican Sayings, the two collections of aphoristic summaries of Epicurean philosophy that survived antiquity and remain among the most important primary sources.

**What Paul Feared and Nietzsche Celebrated: Epicurus as the Philosophical Antichrist** examines the historical confrontation between Epicurean philosophy and early Christianity, showing through Norman DeWitt's *St. Paul and Epicurus* that Paul engaged systematically with Epicurean philosophy throughout his letters — including the "weak and beggarly elements" passage in Galatians as a direct attack on Epicurean atomism, and the hymn to love in First Corinthians 13 as the passage most deeply marked by Epicurean influence. DeWitt's argument that the name "Christian" was coined in Antioch specifically to distinguish the new movement from the disciples of Epicurus is presented in full. Nietzsche's recognition from the other direction — "Epicurus would have won; each respectable mind was Epicurean in the Roman Empire: and then Paul arrived" — is developed with his companion observation that the awakening sciences allied themselves point by point with Epicurus while rejecting Christianity. The article addresses the misreading of Epicurean pleasure as bodily gratification, draws the parallel between Theotocopulos's mob speech in Wells's *Things to Come* and the ancient anti-Epicurean position, and concludes that Humanism is

Christianity with the supernatural removed but the universalist ethics intact — and that genuine Epicurean philosophy is the authentic alternative neither Humanism nor any tradition descended from the Platonic-Christian synthesis has achieved.

**Epicurus And The Jews: Conflict And Opposition** is the companion article, examining the equally deep and historically specific conflict between Epicurean philosophy and Jewish religious tradition. Opening with the Talmudic Mishnah's naming of *Apikorsim* — Epicureans by name — among those who forfeit their share in the world to come, the article shows why this is a precise theological judgment: no ancient philosophical tradition more completely contradicted the foundational claims of Jewish religion. Principal Doctrine 1's insistence that the gods cannot be angered or bestow favor rules out every form of divine intervention, and the chosen-people claim is the most extreme version of the divine-intervention error that Epicurean philosophy was built to dissolve. The historical roots are traced through the Maccabean crisis — Antiochus IV's Epicurean sympathies, the Gymnasium in Jerusalem, and the revolt that permanently associated Epicurean philosophy with foreign domination in Jewish memory. Diogenes of Oinoanda's Fragment 20 is quoted and analyzed as an epistemological argument against divine providence. Nietzsche's slave-revolt analysis is examined — his tracing of distinctively Christian moral values (suffering as ennobling, humility as virtue) to specifically Jewish historical experience of subjection. The article documents the Epicurean empress Pompeia Plotina — whose personal correspondence with Hadrian on behalf of the Epicurean school in Athens begins "How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord" — in the historical context of the Trajanic and Hadrianic Jewish wars. The article closes with Maimonides's continuation of the anti-Epicurean tradition and the observation that the persistence of the *Apikoros* category across twenty-three centuries is itself testimony to the precision of the original identification.

**Rededication: Continuing the Work of Recovering Classical Epicurean Philosophy** opens with a prediction – that the twentieth century and the first third of the twenty-first will be remembered as a crisis of philosophical confidence worse than anything the ancient world endured, with the century-long scholarly and popular misreading of Epicurus as its clearest single symptom. The article traces how the ancient world actually understood him (his real popularity,

his prominent adherents, and the hostile testimony that inadvertently confirms an active, vigorous philosophy rather than a numbed one), the century of "tranquilist" scholarship that inverted this understanding and its likely historical origin in centuries-old Catholic apologetics, the real but still-minority correction underway among a newer generation of scholars, and why EpicureanFriends exists to continue that correction against Stoicism, Platonism, Buddhism, Humanism, and Skepticism alike. It closes by restating the core Epicurean doctrines in full and inviting readers who agree to join the ongoing work.

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## A Tribute to Norman DeWitt

If there is one book that directly inspired the EpicurusToday project — one scholar whose reading of Epicurus confirmed that the mainstream interpretation was wrong and that a better one was possible — it is Norman DeWitt, and his 1954 work *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, published by the University of Minnesota Press.

### Who Was Norman DeWitt?

Norman Wentworth DeWitt was a professor of Latin at Victoria College, University of Toronto, who spent a career studying the ancient world and came to Epicurus late enough in his scholarly life to bring a fully formed classical education to bear on the question of what the philosophy actually said. He published *Epicurus and His Philosophy* in 1954, the same year as its companion volume *St. Paul and Epicurus*, and then largely disappeared from the bibliographies of subsequent Epicurean scholarship.

That disappearance is worth noting. DeWitt is rarely cited by modern academic commentators on Epicurus. When he is cited, it is often to register disagreement. His reading of Epicurus cuts too sharply against the grain of mainstream classical scholarship to be comfortable for those who have invested in the conventional interpretation — the one that domesticates Epicurus into a philosopher of withdrawal, minimal desire, and therapeutic calm. DeWitt will have none of that, and the academy, by and large, has not forgiven him for it. For the purposes of EpicurusToday, however, that is precisely what makes him valuable.

### What Makes the Book Extraordinary

*Epicurus and His Philosophy* was among the first comprehensive treatments of Epicurus in modern English. But what distinguishes it from everything that came before — and most of what has come after — is the ambition and coherence of its central argument. DeWitt's thesis is that Epicurus was not the minor, eccentric, garden-variety hedonist of popular caricature, nor the quietist philosopher of serene contentment that the modern self-help tradition has made of him. He was the founder of the first genuinely systematic philosophy of human happiness built on a materialist account of the world — a philosopher who taught his doctrines with the organizational rigor of a school, the emotional warmth of a community, and the conviction that what he had discovered was urgently needed by ordinary human beings who had been frightened into misery by false beliefs about the gods and death.

The book is organized the way DeWitt says Epicurus himself organized his teaching: beginning with a broad overview and then filling in the details. Epicurus thought of his writings as maps drawn to larger and smaller scales, and the process of learning was regarded as a progression from general maps with few details to regional maps with a proportionate increase in detail. DeWitt applies the same method, giving the reader the sweep of the philosophy before pressing into the specifics of physics, canonics, and ethics.

### How DeWitt Opens: A Warning Every Reader Needs

One of the most valuable things DeWitt does is what he does in his very first chapter. Before presenting the philosophy itself, he prepares the reader for the problem they are about to encounter. The second sentence of Chapter One reads:

> At the very outset the reader should be prepared to think of [Epicurus] at one and the same time as the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in the Graeco-Roman world.

This is not rhetorical flourish. It is an accurate description of the ancient record, and it has direct consequences for how every piece of ancient testimony about Epicurus must be read. The philosophers who hated Epicurus most bitterly — Platonists, Stoics, and later the Christian writers who absorbed their traditions

— were also the philosophers who wrote the most about him. The result is that a very large proportion of the surviving ancient commentary on Epicurus comes from people who despised him, wanted to refute him, and had strong ideological reasons to misrepresent his views. The tradition of representing Epicurus as a vulgar sensualist was built deliberately by his enemies, and it was so effective that it survived long enough to become the popular meaning of the English word *epicure*.

Against both hostile and over-cautious traditions, DeWitt insists on returning to what Epicurus himself wrote, read as carefully and as charitably as the texts of any other major philosopher. That insistence is the methodological foundation of everything that follows — and the same insistence that animates Epicurus-Today.

### How to Get the Book

*Epicurus and His Philosophy* is available in print through the University of Minnesota Press's Minnesota Archive Editions series, and is also freely available at the Internet Archive (archive.org). There is no better single investment a student of Epicurean philosophy can make than reading this book. Start with the first three chapters to get the overview, and then follow wherever your interest takes you.

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## Sources and Further Reading

A consolidated note on sources and further reading for all articles in this collection appears at the end of the book.

For ongoing discussion of all topics covered here, and for access to the latest revisions of these articles and the many additional resources not included in this epub, visit EpicurusToday.com and EpicureanFriends.com.

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# Why This Matters: The EpicurusToday Perspective on Classical Epicurean Philosophy

Epicurus wrote his Letter to Menoeceus not as a treatise for scholars but as a living document for people who wanted to transform how they lived. He opened it with a statement of urgency that the centuries have done nothing to diminish: "Let no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul."[1] The sentence carries a charge that is easy to miss if you have been introduced to Epicurus through the lens of most modern commentary: not the tone of a man recommending detachment, but of a man who understood that time is finite, that groundless fears and empty desires are stealing the life of everyone around him, and that the antidote is available to anyone willing to claim it.

This article is an explanation of the EpicurusToday.com perspective, why most popular treatments of Epicurus get him wrong, and what genuine engagement with his philosophy actually looks like. It is also, necessarily, a critique — not of individuals, but of a persistent interpretive tradition that has transformed one of the most vital and combative philosophers in the ancient world into a patron saint of comfortable withdrawal.

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## The Problem: Epicurus Has Been Domesticated

The dominant modern presentation of Epicurus, whether in academic philosophy, popular books, or the proliferating genre of internet "philosophy videos," tends to go something like this: Epicurus was a gentle hedonist who taught us to

enjoy simple pleasures, avoid unnecessary desires, appreciate friendship, and reduce anxiety. He is routinely presented as a proto-mindfulness teacher, a forerunner of modern therapeutic practice, an ancient voice for "slowing down." In the most Stoicized versions of his legacy — and there are many — he is reduced to a slightly softer version of Marcus Aurelius: wise, moderate, accepting, fundamentally at peace with whatever life brings.

This picture is not entirely false. But it omits exactly what Epicurus himself considered the most important part of his philosophy, and it drains the rest of the meaning that context would supply.

What is omitted, most fundamentally, is pleasure. Not the narrow pleasure of a good meal or a warm bath, but *pleasure as the natural goal of life* — Epicurus's explicit, unapologetic, repeatedly stated central claim. The claim that nature herself has given every living creature from birth the feeling of pleasure as a sign of the good and pain as a sign of the harmful, and that a philosophy which does not begin and end with this natural guidance has lost its way from the first sentence. The claim that the entire Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Humanist tradition — by elevating virtue, duty, rational conformity, or divine logos above the testimony of nature — got the most fundamental question of philosophy wrong, in ways that have had catastrophic consequences for human happiness across two and a half millennia.

The reason this is omitted is worth examining. It is not primarily laziness or ignorance, though both play a role. It is that *pleasure is an uncomfortable claim*. It was uncomfortable in the ancient world, which is why Cicero worked so hard to misrepresent it and why Plutarch devoted an essay to attacking it. It remains uncomfortable in the modern world, saturated as it still is — whether consciously or not — with the legacy of Platonic and Christian suspicion of bodily experience and immediate gratification. The most convenient way to handle this discomfort without engaging with the argument is to reinterpret "pleasure" as something safe: tranquility, absence of pain, contentment, equanimity. These are all real features of the Epicurean life, but they are features of the *outcome*, not the *goal*. And the substitution, repeated often enough across enough commentaries, has produced a philosophy that Epicurus himself would not recognize.

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## The Tetrapharmakon Problem: A Case Study in Domestication

There is no more telling illustration of this domestication than the treatment of what scholars call the Tetrapharmakon — the four-line passage that has become, in popular discussions and YouTube videos and introductory philosophy courses, the most widely cited "summary" of Epicurean philosophy:

*Don't fear god, Don't worry about death; What is good is easy to get, What is terrible is easy to endure.*

The problem is essentially this: this formulation does not come from Epicurus. It appears in a fragmentary, charred papyrus attributed to Philodemus — written two centuries after Epicurus, without the surrounding context preserved, in a work that modern scholar Anna Angeli has reconstructed as being concerned with precisely the problem of *insufficient reading* of the original texts. Another dissenting voice on that papyrus, Francesco Sbordone, has argued directly that the four lines represent the position of Philodemus's *adversaries* — the oversimplifying Epicureans he was arguing *against*, not the summary he was endorsing.

Whether that reading is correct or not, the passage is wildly inadequate as a summary of Epicurean philosophy for one simple and devastating reason: the word *pleasure* does not appear in it. Not once. A supposed summary of a philosophy whose central claim is that pleasure is the natural goal of life, that has been quoted for a century as if it captured the heart of that philosophy, does not contain the heart of that philosophy.

This is not an accident. It is a symptom. The formulation renders Epicurus comfortable — four things to stop worrying about, four anxieties to release — and thereby converts him from a philosopher of the fullest possible positive engagement with life into a technique for managing distress. And this is exactly why the formulation resonates so well with readers who want to reconcile Epicurus with Stoicism and modern religion: you can accept all four lines and never disturb your existing ethical framework, never confront the claim about pleasure, never ask the question that Epicurus spent his life pressing on: *what does nature herself actually tell us about what is good?*

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## You Only Live Once: The Urgency That Commentary Suppresses

The most practically consequential thing about Epicurean philosophy is also the most consistently understated in popular treatments: it is a philosophy of urgency. Not the frantic urgency of anxiety, but the clear-eyed urgency that comes from genuinely internalizing what Epicurus actually demonstrated about the nature of human life.

You were born once. You will die once. The entire span of your conscious experience — every relationship, every pleasure, every achievement of understanding, every moment of genuine connection with other people — exists within that single unrepeatable arc. There is no second chance, no postponement to a later existence, no divine reward for having suffered virtuously through this one. Vatican Saying 14 is explicit, and it is addressed specifically to those who are putting their happiness off: "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 without allowing himself leisure."[2]

The practical consequence of taking this seriously — genuinely internalizing it rather than accepting it as an interesting philosophical position — is not detachment. It is the opposite. It is a fire under everything. It is the recognition that every moment spent in groundless fear, every year devoted to the pursuit of empty goods, every relationship avoided because the groundwork of genuine friendship seemed like too much effort, is a moment, a year, a friendship *permanently gone*. The person who has genuinely understood this does not retreat from life. They lean into it with a focus and a wholeness of engagement that the person who still believes, however faintly, that there might be more time, more chances, a second life in which to get things right, is unlikely to achieve.

Lucretius understood this. His treatment of the fear of death in Book III of *De Rerum Natura* is not a calm philosophical exercise in acceptance. It is an impassioned, even ferocious argument on behalf of the living against the forces that are stealing their lives by convincing them that death is something more than the

dispersal of atoms. Men "pass their lives," he writes, "knowing not each one of them what he wants, and longing ever for change of place, as though he could thus lay aside the burden."[3] The intensity in Lucretius is not accidental — it is the natural expression of a philosophy that has looked at what time actually means and drawn the practical conclusion.

This urgency is almost completely absent from the popular domesticated version of Epicurus. The reason is clear enough: urgency is uncomfortable. It demands something. The reader who comes to Epicurus looking for permission to slow down and appreciate small pleasures will find it, because small pleasures are genuinely good and the Epicurean is right to appreciate them. But they will miss the larger claim: that the point is not the *smallness* of the pleasures but the *fullness* of the life from which nothing genuine has been excluded. Epicurus was not counseling a reduced life of modest satisfactions. He was arguing that the life organized around what nature actually provides — genuine friendship, freedom from groundless fear, understanding of the world, and the full range of natural pleasures freely pursued — is the *greatest* life available to a human being. What the domesticated version offers as the whole of his wisdom is in reality only the correction of excess, not the positive vision. The positive vision is a life lived at full intensity, with nothing stolen from it by false fears or empty obligations to abstract principles that contradict what nature is already telling you.

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## DeWitt's Warning: The British Commentary Tradition

Norman DeWitt, in the introduction to *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1954) — which remains the most important English-language scholarly study of Epicurus from an Epicurean perspective — identified a specific interpretive tradition as the source of much of the distortion he was working against: the British classical commentary tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

DeWitt's critique is pointed and specific. He traces the misreading of Epicurus to a tradition that approached the ancient texts with a set of prior commitments — moral, cultural, and theological — that made it impossible to receive what Epicurus was actually saying. The British commentators, trained in a classical

education that treated Plato and Aristotle as the peaks of ancient thought and that was still saturated, even in its secular forms, with the structure of Christian ethics, encountered the claim that pleasure is the highest good and found it either distasteful or absurd. Their translation choices, their editorial emphases, their summaries and introductions, all reflected this prior judgment. Pleasure was consistently narrowed to mean something respectable and non-threatening. Epicurus was consistently read as agreeing, in all the ways that mattered, with the broader Platonic-Stoic-Christian consensus that virtue is the real good and pleasure at best an accompaniment to it.

The consequences of this tradition are still with us. Every popular introduction to Epicurus that presents him as a philosopher of moderation, tranquility, and simple pleasures — without confronting the actual claim that *pleasure is the goal of life and the natural testimony of what is good* — is working within the framework that DeWitt identified. Every treatment of Epicurus that suggests he and the Stoics are basically agreeable companions on the road to wisdom, differing only in emphasis, is perpetuating the Stoicized Epicurus that DeWitt spent his career fighting.

The contemporary version of this tradition is visible in the proliferation of philosophy content — books, podcasts, YouTube channels, popular articles — that presents Epicurus as a proto-Stoic, a mindfulness teacher, a man who would have been quite at home with the current vogue for equanimity and "resilience" as personal virtues. The tone is invariably genial, inclusive, non-confrontational. There is room for everyone; Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius and the Stoics are all, in their different ways, pointing toward the same sage wisdom about managing a difficult world. The possibility that Epicurus considered the Stoic position to be not a complementary wisdom but a fundamental *error* — one with deeply practical consequences for anyone who accepted it — is politely set aside.

The argument of many popular vidoes about Epicurus on Youtube runs, essentially, that Epicurus teaches us to be satisfied with what we have, to appreciate simple pleasures, to reduce our desires, and to cultivate a kind of philosophical calm in the face of life's difficulties. The presentations are often warm, intelligent, and well-intentioned. But Pleasure as the natural goal of life, the urgency that comes from genuinely accepting mortality, the combative quality of Epicur-

ean engagement with competing philosophies, the role of genuine friendship as the greatest good wisdom can secure — none of these are present. What is present is the reassurance that philosophy, handled correctly, can help you feel better about whatever situation you find yourself in.

This is not nothing. But it is only a small part of Epicurus.



## The Humanist Misappropriation

Related to the British commentary tradition but distinct from it is the misappropriation of Epicurus by Humanism — the secular philosophical movement that presents itself as the natural heir to the ancient Greek tradition of reason-based ethics. Humanism is, in many respects, a genuine improvement over supernatural religion: it grounds ethics in human experience rather than divine command, it takes science seriously, and it expresses genuine concern for human welfare. For all these reasons, the Epicurean and Humanist projects can look superficially similar, and Epicurus is routinely enlisted as a Humanist precursor.

But the enlistment requires the same move that the British commentary tradition made with Epicurus: the suppression or redefinition of pleasure as the natural goal of life. Humanism, in its various modern forms, grounds ethics not in the natural testimony of pleasure and pain but in *reason as an abstract faculty of moral judgment*. The Humanist asks: what does reason demand of us? What principles of conduct can rational beings universally endorse? What abstract goods — human flourishing, autonomy, dignity — can be derived from rational reflection on what we owe each other?

These are recognizably Kantian questions dressed in secular clothing. And Epicurus's answer to them would be exactly what his answer was to Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics: you are asking the wrong question, and the wrong framing of the question is going to lead you to wrong conclusions. The correct starting point is not what reason abstractly demands but what *nature* has actually given every living creature as guidance about what is good and harmful. That guidance is pleasure and pain. It is not an abstract principle; it is a felt reality, present in every living moment, prior to any philosophical reflection.

The practical difference matters. Humanist ethics, like Stoic ethics, tends toward the view that genuine morality requires some degree of self-overriding: that what I *want* is not what I *should* want, that the claims of others on me may require me to sacrifice my own pleasure, and that the highest human life is one in which reason governs desire. This is exactly the structure that Epicurus rejected. He did not deny that we have obligations to others — his account of justice and friendship are rich and substantive. But he derived those obligations not from abstract rational duty but from the straightforward recognition that friendship genuinely produces pleasure, that justice genuinely enables the security within which pleasurable life is possible, and that the person who genuinely understands their own good will pursue these naturally, not as a sacrifice to abstract principle but as an expression of what they actually want.

Humanism takes the secular surface of Epicurus — the rejection of divine providence, the grounding of ethics in human experience, the emphasis on friendship and community — while discarding the substantive content that makes Epicurus specifically Epicurean. What remains after the discarding is a philosophy that looks a great deal like Stoicism without the theological superstructure: ethics grounded in abstract rational principle, with the natural testimony of pleasure and pain reduced to the status of a motivation to be educated and, when necessary, overridden.

The person who comes to Epicurus through Humanism typically encounters a version of him that is essentially indistinguishable from a secular Stoic: wise, rational, committed to human welfare, and fundamentally uncomfortable with the claim that what nature tells us through pleasure is an adequate and sufficient guide to the good life. This discomfort is the tell. The genuine Epicurean position is that nature's guidance through pleasure and pain is not a starting point to be refined by reason into something more respectable — it *is* the standard by which all of reason's refinements must themselves be judged.

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## Nietzsche's Warning: The British Perspective on Philosophy and Life

Friedrich Nietzsche identified the same tendency — applied more broadly than to Epicurus specifically — as a defining feature of what he called the "English" approach to philosophy and ethics. In *Twilight of the Idols* and elsewhere, Nietzsche attacked what he saw as the characteristic British move in ethics: replacing genuine engagement with life's questions with a kind of comfortable utilitarian calculation, trading the demand for excellence for a politics of anxiety management, and dignifying this reduction as philosophical maturity.

Nietzsche's critique of Darwin is particularly relevant here, though not for the obvious reasons. He was not attacking the biological theory of evolution. He was attacking what he saw as the characteristic British interpretation of it: the reading of natural selection as a story of progressive improvement in the direction of greater comfort and security, a reading that fit too neatly with false Victorian optimism about civilization as the steady accumulation of rational social arrangements for human happiness. For Nietzsche, this was a story about *diminishment* told as though it were a story about *achievement* — a leveling down disguised as progress.

The connection to Epicurus is this: the same move that Nietzsche identified in British progressive thought is the move that gets made to Epicurus in the domesticated tradition. Epicurus's philosophy, which is in reality a demanding claim about what it means to live fully as the kind of being that a human being actually is — a mortal, sensate creature in a material world, equipped with natural faculties for knowing what is good, obligated by the very fact of mortality to pursue it now and without apology — gets reinterpreted as a philosophy of peaceful management of decline. The demand is replaced with the reassurance. The urgency is replaced with the calm. The combative engagement with ideas that Epicurus himself modeled is replaced with the suggestion that all philosophical positions can be appreciated from a comfortable, non-committal distance.

Bertrand Russell's treatment of Epicurus in *A History of Western Philosophy* is a fair example of what Nietzsche was identifying. Russell's summary is not hostile,

but it is condescending in precisely the way Nietzsche diagnosed: Epicurus is presented as a philosopher of withdrawal, of retreat from public life into the garden, of limited and essentially passive pleasures. The claim that pleasure is the natural good is noted but not taken seriously as a philosophical argument — it is, for Russell, the position of a "tired" civilization rather than the carefully worked out position of a man who had looked hard at what Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics were actually saying and found the entire program wrong at its foundation.

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## The Combative Epicurus: What the Domesticated Version Erases

The historical Epicurus was, by any measure, a combative thinker. He called Plato's followers "toadies of Dionysius" and referred to Plato himself as "golden" in a tone that was emphatically not complimentary.[4] He described certain positions as "destroyers of philosophy" and did not trouble himself with the kind of ecumenical courtesy that modern commentators extend to all positions equally. He was not trying to find common ground with the Platonists or Stoics; he was asserting that their fundamental premise — virtue as the highest good — was wrong, and he was saying so directly.

This combativeness was not a personality defect. It was the expression of a philosophical conviction that has practical consequences. If pleasure is genuinely the natural guide of life, and if systems of thought that displace pleasure with duty, virtue, divine providence, or rational self-mastery genuinely lead people away from the happiness that is their natural birthright, then those systems are not harmless intellectual competitors. They are causing genuine harm to real people who accept them. The Epicurean response to this is not neutrality.

Epicurus's combativeness was specifically directed at what has evolved into the main adulterating traditions of philosophy: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, supernatural religion, and radical skepticism. Each of these was not merely an alternative view but a positive obstacle to the correct understanding of what the good life actually is. The Epicurean community's commitment to the original texts of Epicurus — the Letters, the Principal Doctrines, the Vatican

Sayings — was itself an act of philosophical combativeness: a refusal to allow the clarity of Epicurus's own statements to be blurred by the interpretive frameworks of schools that had strong institutional and theological reasons to misrepresent him.

EpicurusToday.com is doing the same thing, in the same spirit, with the same conviction.

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## Cassius Longinus the Liberator: Epicurean Philosophy as the Foundation for Decisive Action

Among the most instructive examples of what genuine Epicurean conviction looks like in practice is the historical record of Gaius Cassius Longinus — the leading conspirator in the revolt against Julius Caesar, and a man who, in his surviving correspondence with Cicero, identified his Epicurean philosophy as the foundation of his political and moral commitments.

David Sedley, in his essay "The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius" (*Journal of Roman Studies*, 1997), examines this evidence with characteristic precision.[5] The standard ancient account holds that Epicurean philosophy was incompatible with political engagement — that Epicurus counseled withdrawal from public life, and that Cassius, as an Epicurean, was therefore philosophically inconsistent in taking the action he took. Sedley argues that this misreads both Epicurus and Cassius.

Cassius's letter to Cicero, written in the period leading up to the Ides of March, makes clear that his motivation was not Stoic duty or Platonic obligation to the ideal republic. It was, in his own framing, the product of his Epicurean understanding of what the good life requires. A tyrant who destroys the conditions for the political freedom within which the Epicurean good life can be pursued is not merely a political problem; he is a direct threat to everything the philosophy holds dear. The withdrawal from public life that Epicurus counseled was withdrawal from the empty ambition of office-seeking and status competition — not withdrawal from the defense of the conditions for genuine human happiness.

The Cassius Longinus example matters because it is the most vivid ancient illustration of what Epicurean philosophy looks like when it is taken seriously enough to act on. Not the gentle philosopher in his garden, content to cultivate his friendships while the world outside arranges itself as it will. A man who understood what was at stake, who brought the resources of his philosophical training to bear on a real-world judgment about what needed to be done, and who acted — decisively, at great personal risk, and with full awareness of the consequences.

Whether or not one endorses what Cassius did in regard to Julius Caesar is beside the point. The point is the quality of engagement: the willingness to be *in* the world with everything the philosophy provides, rather than retreating behind it as a personal psychological management tool.

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## The Petronius Lesson: The Price of Bemused Detachment

Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis*, set in Nero's Rome, presents in the character of Petronius one of the most searching fictional examinations of what the philosophy of pleasure looks like when it is lived as aesthetic detachment rather than genuine engagement. Petronius is brilliant, cultivated, genuinely perceptive, and genuinely attached to beauty and intelligent pleasure. He is also, by his own eventual admission, a man who chose to be an *amused spectator* at the catastrophe unfolding around him, reserving his critical faculties for witty observations about the imperial court's degradation while doing nothing to check it.

Petronius's dying self-assessment — that he allowed himself to be only an "amused cynic," a connoisseur of the decline he watched — is among the most devastating critiques of a certain kind of philosophical aestheticism that Western literature has produced. It is also a critique that resonates directly with the domesticated version of Epicurean philosophy that presents the philosophy as a way of achieving personal equanimity while remaining pleasantly uninvested in the world's direction.

The historical Epicurus was not Petronius. He did not counsel intelligent people to cultivate beautiful detachment while the forces of superstition, tyranny, and

philosophical error did their work around them. He counseled engagement — philosophical engagement, yes, centered on the community of friends rather than on political ambition, but engagement driven by the conviction that the understanding he had reached was of genuine importance to anyone he could bring it to. Vatican Saying 41, as explained in Cyril Bailey's edition, is explicit: everyone was urged to become an apostle, never ceasing to proclaim the doctrines of the true philosophy.[6]

The person who has genuinely understood Epicurean philosophy — who has genuinely internalized the once-only nature of life, the reality of pleasure and pain as natural guides, the devastating practical consequences of the competing systems — does not become an amused bystander. They become something much closer to what DeWitt describes the ancient Epicureans as being: apostles for a philosophy that could genuinely help people live well, with a deep personal investment in the outcome.

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## Hypatia and the Collapse: What Detachment Costs

The story of Hypatia of Alexandria — the Platonist philosopher and mathematician who was murdered by a Christian mob in 415 CE, while the intellectual culture of Alexandria crumbled around her — carries a lesson that is relevant today, though it requires some care in the telling.

The film version of Hypatia's story presents her as a genuine intellectual hero: courageous, brilliant, committed to the life of the mind in circumstances that made that commitment increasingly dangerous. But it also presents — in its account of the Platonic philosophical community she was part of — a picture of failed intellectual engagement that ultimately proved inadequate to the situation it faced. The community's commitment was to *contemplation* rather than to active engagement with the forces that were destroying the conditions for contemplation. The world that had made Alexandria's intellectual culture possible was collapsing, and the philosophical tradition associated with Plato — with its emphasis on withdrawal from worldly affairs toward the contemplation of higher truths — provided inadequate resources for resisting that collapse.

The comparison to the Epicurean tradition is instructive. The great inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda — carved on a public wall sometime in the second century CE, specifically to spread the healing message of Epicurean philosophy to as wide an audience as possible — represents the opposite impulse. Diogenes understood that philosophy was not for the contemplative few but for everyone who was suffering needlessly from groundless fear and empty desire, which was essentially everyone. His inscription was an act of philosophical activism — the ancient equivalent of a public education campaign, driven by the conviction that the understanding he had reached was urgently needed and that it was his calling to communicate it as widely and clearly as possible.

This is the spirit that animates someone who understands Epicurus accurately. Not the construction of a private garden of philosophical refinement for those already inclined to philosophy, but the active effort to present Epicurean philosophy clearly, accurately, and with the urgency that its content actually demands, to anyone who might benefit from it.

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## What the EpicurusToday Perspective Actually Is

Against this background, the principles that inspire the continued work of EpicurusToday and EpicureanFriends can be stated clearly:

**First: Pleasure is the goal, not the technique.** Epicurean philosophy is not a technique for managing anxiety. It is a comprehensive account of what it means to live a genuinely good life, grounded in the claim that nature herself — through the feelings of pleasure and pain she has given every living creature — has told us what the good actually is. This claim is controversial, has always been controversial, and has been consistently misrepresented and suppressed by competing philosophical and religious traditions for twenty-four centuries. We take it seriously as a philosophical claim and present it as such.

**Second: The primary sources are the authority.** The three letters of Epicurus, the Principal Doctrines, the Vatican Sayings, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, the fragments of Diogenes of Oenoanda, and the well–preserved writings of authentic Epicureans such as Philodemus are the authorities on what Epicurus actually

taught. Secondary commentators — however learned, however well-intentioned — are useful only insofar as they illuminate what those texts actually say. When secondary commentary systematically distorts the primary texts in the direction of making Epicurus comfortable and non-threatening, as has been the case with much of the tradition we have identified in this article, the primary texts are the corrective.

**Third: The philosophy is integrated, not cafeteria-style.** Epicurean physics, Epicurean canonics, and Epicurean ethics are not three separate bodies of doctrine from which a reader can pick what resonates and leave the rest. They are an integrated system: the physics establishes what kind of world we live in (material, without supernatural governance, without afterlife), the canonics establishes how we know what we know (through sensation, anticipation, and the feelings of pleasure and pain — not through dialectic or revelation), and the ethics establishes what we should do in the world we actually inhabit. The person who adopts the ethics while rejecting the physics, or who adopts the physics while dismissing the epistemology, has not adopted Epicurean philosophy.

**Fourth: This is urgent.** The urgency comes directly from the philosophy's own most central insight: you only live once. The time to claim your happiness is now, and every year spent under the influence of groundless fear, empty desire, or false philosophical frameworks that counsel virtuous suffering over genuine pleasure is a year permanently gone. Epicureans take this urgency seriously, and it shapes how the material is presented: not as a gentle invitation to an interesting intellectual discussion, but as a direct challenge to consider whether what you currently believe about what makes life good is actually true.

**Fifth: Engagement, not retreat.** The classical Epicurean community was not a philosophical therapy group for those who had already largely opted out of the world. It was a community of people committed to a philosophy that had direct implications for how to live, what to pursue, what to resist, and how to spend the one life available to them. The activities of EpicurusToday and EpicureanFriends are conducted in the same spirit: with the conviction that getting the philosophy right matters, that the alternatives are genuinely worse for real people who accept them, and that the work of communicating it clearly is worth doing as well as we can do it.

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## Conclusion: Participants, Not Spectators

Epicurus charged his followers with a specific responsibility that runs through everything this article has argued. In the Vatican collection, Saying 41 records: "We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."[7] The combination is important: the laughter is Epicurean — it is the natural expression of a life lived fully and without false fears. The household management is Epicurean — the philosophy has direct practical applications and does not counsel flight from the obligations of ordinary life. And the proclamation is Epicurean — the conviction that what has been understood is genuinely worth sharing, and that sharing it is itself an expression of the *philia*, the friendship and good will, that animates the entire Epicurean project.

The amused cynic who watches the world decline from a position of witty detachment is not an Epicurean. The person who reduces Epicurus to four lines about not worrying about things is not presenting Epicurus. The tradition that domesticates the most urgent claim in ancient philosophy — that you have one life, that pleasure is its natural goal, that the time is now — into a technique for staying calm while someone else's priorities arrange your world around you, is not a tradition worth following.

EpicurusToday.com and EpicureanFriends.com exist to present the other Epicurus: the one who called Plato's followers toadies and meant it, who identified the direction Greek philosophy had taken after Socrates as a disaster and said so, who understood that the fear of death and the pursuit of empty goods were not mild inconveniences but genuine sources of human suffering that philosophy had both the ability and the obligation to address. The one who closed his Letter to Menoeceus with the charge to *practice these things day and night*, not to appreciate them from a philosophical distance. The one whose community was animated, as DeWitt summarizes, by the conviction that "everyone was urged to become an apostle, never ceasing to proclaim the doctrines of the true philosophy."[8]

That is what we are doing here. That is why it matters.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Epicurus In The Modern World

*What Stoics Humanists Buddhists And The Faith Community Need To Understand When Approaching Epicurean Philosophy*

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Epicurus is having a moment. After nearly two thousand years of suppression, caricature, and deliberate misrepresentation – largely at the hands of the philosophical and religious traditions that succeeded him in the West – his philosophy is attracting renewed serious attention. Popular books invoke his name. Philosophy podcasts discuss his ethics. Online communities study his texts. The language of "Epicurean" has entered the cultural conversation again, however imprecisely.

This renewed interest is welcome. But it brings with it a set of persistent problems that have distorted the reception of Epicurean philosophy for as long as it has been discussed. The problem is not simply ignorance of the texts – though that is common enough. The deeper problem is that most people who encounter Epicurus for the first time bring with them frameworks, assumptions, and prior commitments drawn from other traditions – Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, and the Abrahamic religions – that act as lenses distorting what they read before they have even begun to read it honestly. These lenses are so culturally pervasive and so deeply internalized that most readers are unaware they are wearing them.

The purpose of this essay is to address each of these traditions directly: to name the specific ways in which the assumptions of Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, and Abrahamic religion generate predictable and systematic misreadings of Epicurus, and to outline what an honest encounter with the actual Epicurean texts

requires by way of prior unlearning. The goal is not to attack these traditions for their own sake. It is to clear the ground for a genuine reading of a philosophy that has been buried under centuries of hostile interpretation and is only now beginning to be recovered on its own terms.



## I. The Common Root of the Problem: The "True World" Fallacy

Before addressing each tradition separately, it is worth naming what they share – because the most important distortions introduced by Stoics, Humanists, Buddhists, and Abrahamists alike all trace back to a single philosophical error that Epicurus identified and attacked, and that Friedrich Nietzsche, two millennia later, called "the longest error in the history of philosophy."

The error is the positing of a "true world" behind or above or beyond the world of natural experience – a realm of perfect, permanent, unchanging being to which the natural world of sensation, change, and impermanence is merely a pale approximation, a fallen shadow, or an illusion to be transcended. Plato called this realm the Forms. Christianity calls it Heaven and the divine order. Islam calls it the eternal realm of Allah's design. Stoicism calls it the Logos and Providence. Buddhism in many of its forms posits Nirvana as a liberation from the cycle of impermanent becoming. Modern Humanism, while it has largely abandoned supernatural metaphysics, retains the structure in its commitment to universal Reason, objective moral law grounded in human dignity, and the ideal of Progress toward a rationally ordered future.

All of these frameworks share, at their core, a distrust of the natural world as the proper source of knowledge and value. The senses are unreliable. Pleasure is suspect. Change marks inferiority. The particular – this life, this body, these friendships, these specific pleasures – is subordinated to the universal, the eternal, the abstract. The philosopher's task is to *transcend* the natural, not to understand and embrace it.

Epicurus's philosophy is, from first principle to last conclusion, a systematic refusal of this entire structure. He is not a variant of Platonism, a gentler version of

Stoicism, a Hellenistic approximation of Buddhism, or a proto-Humanist. He is something genuinely different – and that difference cannot be appreciated without first recognizing and suspending the assumptions each of these traditions imports into any reading of him.

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## II. What Stoics Need to Understand

Of all the modern traditions that engage with Epicurus, Stoicism is the most sophisticated and in many ways the most sympathetic. Stoics and Epicureans are often discussed together, since both were Hellenistic schools responding to similar questions about how to live well in an uncertain world. But the philosophical differences between them are deep, and the fact of their surface similarities makes the Stoic misreading of Epicurus in some ways the most dangerous, because it is the most plausible.

**The duty error.** The most fundamental Stoic misreading of Epicurus is the assumption that the good philosophy must generate a concept of *duty* – an obligation to engage with the world, serve others, and participate in civic life that is grounded in something beyond the individual's own assessment of what brings genuine happiness. Stoics have this concept: we have duties because we are fragments of the divine Logos, because Zeus/Providence has structured the universe as a rational whole in which each part has its proper role, and because we are citizens not merely of our local community but of the cosmos. When Stoics evaluate Epicurus, they apply this standard and find him deficient: Epicurean philosophy, they say, lacks a duty to engage.

This criticism assumes what it is supposed to prove. The Stoic concept of duty rests on theological foundations – the Logos, Providence, cosmic citizenship – that Epicurus explicitly rejected as mythology. There are no divine purposes written into the universe. There is no Providence organizing events for our benefit or instruction. The universe has no design, and our place in it carries no cosmic obligations. To evaluate Epicureanism by asking "but where is the duty?" is simply to ask whether Epicurus accepts Stoic theology. He does not. The correct question is whether Epicureanism provides sufficient motivation for civic and social engagement through its own principles – and it does, through the genuine

pleasures of friendship, contribution, intellectual life, and the security of living in a well-ordered community. But these motivations are grounded in nature and pleasure, not in metaphysical obligation.

**The ataraxia error.** The second major Stoic misreading is the identification of Epicureanism with the pursuit of *ataraxia* – tranquillity, or freedom from mental disturbance – as its *telos*, its ultimate goal. This error is nearly universal in modern discussions of Epicurus, including among Stoic commentators, and it generates a false portrait of Epicurean ethics as essentially passive, withdrawal-oriented, and indifferent to active engagement with the world.

The telos of Epicurean ethics is not ataraxia. It is **happiness** (*eudaimonia*), defined as a life in which pleasures predominate over pains. Ataraxia – the calm, undisturbed mind – is one component of this happiness, one form that pleasure takes when the mind is free from irrational anxiety. But it is a component, not the whole. The pleasures of active life – of friendship, intellectual engagement, civic contribution, physical pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment, and the full range of what Epicurus called "kinetic" pleasures – are no less genuinely pleasurable for being active rather than calm. The Epicurean goal is not a monk's tranquillity. It is the richest life of genuine happiness available to a natural creature in a natural world.

The confusion arises partly because Stoicism itself places great emphasis on inner peace and equanimity, and partly because the Judeo-Christian and Humanist frameworks filtering Western readings of both schools favor "calm reason" over pleasure as the mark of philosophical achievement. When a reader formed by these traditions encounters Epicurean language about freedom from disturbance, they hear what their prior formation has trained them to hear – the Stoic sage in serene rational control of his passions – rather than what Epicurus actually said.

**The apoliticism error.** A third Stoic misreading is the portrait of Epicureans as philosophically apolitical – people who retreat to their Garden while Stoics engage with the republic. This portrait derives almost entirely from ancient Stoic and Academic polemics and does not survive contact with the actual historical record. Epicureans across five centuries served as royal advisers, diplomats, priests, ambassadors, civic magistrates, and active participants in political events

at the highest levels. Gaius Cassius Longinus, a committed Epicurean who corresponded with Cicero on the precise doctrines of the school, was a principal figure in the assassination of Julius Caesar. Titus Pomponius Atticus was banker, publisher, and intimate political counselor to Cicero, Mark Antony, and Augustus simultaneously. Trebatius Testa was Caesar's legal adviser and one of the greatest jurists of his age. Julius Caesar himself displayed many Epicurean tendencies. Philonides of Laodicea converted a Seleucid king to Epicurean philosophy and served as his royal adviser. The list is long and well-documented.

The honest Stoic student of Epicurus needs to engage with the actual texts on their own terms, not through the lens of Stoic duty-language – and needs to confront the historical record honestly rather than filing Epicurean political engagement under "exceptions" and "loopholes."

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## III. What Humanists Need to Understand

Modern Humanism might appear to be the intellectual tradition most amenable to Epicurus, since it shares his naturalism, his rejection of supernatural religion, and his commitment to reason as the guide to the good life. Many contemporary Humanists have claimed Epicurus as a forerunner or kindred spirit. But this affinity is overblown, and where it breaks down the distortions are significant.

**The virtue-as-end error.** Humanism inherits from its Renaissance origins a deep commitment to the supposed dignity of all humanity, the centrality of rational virtue, and the idea that the good person is defined above all by excellence of character and contribution to the human community. These are broadly Neo-Stoic and Neo-Platonic commitments, and they generate a characteristic misreading of Epicurus: the tendency to treat his philosophy as essentially an ethics of virtue and rational self-cultivation, with the pleasure language handled as rhetorical decoration or loosely interpreted as "well-being."

But Epicurus is explicit and unambiguous: virtue is not the goal of life. It is the most important *instrument* for achieving the goal, which is happiness defined as the predominance of pleasure over pain. Every virtue – courage, justice, temperance, prudence, friendship – is valued by Epicurus because and insofar as it actu-

ally produces pleasure and reduces pain in real human lives. Virtue that did not produce pleasure would have no claim on us. This is not a subtle qualification. It is the foundation of the whole ethical system, and it is directly opposed to every tradition – Platonic, Stoic, Kantian, Humanist – that treats virtue or rational dignity as an end in itself.

The Humanist reader who softens this into "Epicurus valued virtue because it conduces to well-being" is on the right track but needs to go further: *pleasure* – actual, felt pleasure, the real experience of a living creature – is the measure by which virtue is judged valuable. Not "well-being" in a thin, sanitized sense, but the concrete guidance of the feelings that Nature has built into us. This is a much more radical commitment than most Humanist accounts of Epicurus acknowledge.

**The universal reason error.** Humanism is characterized by the commitment to universal human reason – the idea that all human beings share a rational nature that grounds universal rights, universal dignity, and universal moral obligations. This commitment has Stoic roots (the divine Logos present in all rational beings) and Kantian elaborations (the categorical imperative binding all rational agents), and it is irreconcilable with Epicurean philosophy at several points.

Epicurean justice is not universal and eternal but contractual and contextual. Justice is a compact – an agreement between people not to harm one another and not to be harmed – that is just only so long as it actually serves mutual benefit in the relevant circumstances. "Justice never is anything in itself" (*Principal Doctrine* 33).[1] Laws that cease to serve the purpose of the compact cease to be just. There is no Platonic Form of Justice, no divine command, no categorical imperative grounding absolute universal obligations. The just is what actually works, for actual people, in actual circumstances.

This does not make Epicurean ethics relativistic in the Sophistic sense – the anticipation (*prolepsis*) of justice is shared by all human beings because we share a common nature with common needs and experiences of benefit and harm. But the contract theory is genuinely incompatible with the kind of universal rational rights-language that dominates modern Humanism, and the Humanist reader who tries to press Epicurus into that framework will find the texts resisting at every turn.

**The progress narrative.** Modern Humanism typically embeds ethics in a narrative of progress – the rational improvement of human institutions, the expansion of rights, the gradual realization of universal human dignity. This narrative has deep roots in Enlightenment thought and carries an implicitly teleological structure: history is moving somewhere, and the philosopher's task is to contribute to that movement.

Epicurus has no such narrative. The universe has no telos. History has no direction. Human civilization has a natural genealogy – Lucretius traces it in remarkable detail in *De Rerum Natura* Book 5 – but that genealogy is not a story of progress toward a rational ideal. It is a story of natural processes generating the social arrangements that provide security and the conditions for genuine happiness. The task is not to advance a progressive narrative but to understand the natural world clearly enough to live well in it. This is a genuinely different orientation, and the Humanist who comes to Epicurus expecting a philosophical ally in the progressive project will need to reckon honestly with the difference.

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## IV. What Buddhists Need to Understand

Of all the non-Western traditions that are often compared to Epicureanism, Buddhism is the most frequently cited. Surface resemblances are indeed present: both philosophies emphasize the importance of understanding the nature of suffering, both value mental equanimity, both have strong traditions of communal philosophical practice, and both counsel against the anxious pursuit of things that cannot satisfy. These resemblances have led some modern readers to treat Epicurus and the Buddha as essentially teaching the same philosophy in different cultural idioms.

They are not. The differences are deep and philosophically significant, and the Buddhist reader who approaches Epicurus expecting to find a Greek cousin of the Dharma will misread him at almost every crucial point.

**The suffering vs. pleasure inversion.** Buddhism begins with the first noble truth: *dukkha* – suffering, unsatisfactoriness, the pervasive sense that conditioned existence is inadequate. The philosophical project of Buddhism is, at its

core, a project of liberation *from* the suffering inherent in conditioned existence. The diagnosis is that attachment to impermanent things generates suffering, and the cure is the progressive detachment from craving and aversion that culminates, in many Buddhist formulations, in Nirvana – a state that is not happiness in any ordinary sense but the cessation of the conditions that generate suffering.

Epicurus begins from the opposite direction. His first move is not a diagnosis of suffering but an affirmation of pleasure as the natural guide given to all living creatures by Nature itself. The question is not "how do we escape the suffering inherent in existence?" but "what kind of life actually produces the greatest predominance of pleasure over pain?" Life is not the problem. The natural world is not the problem. The problem is false beliefs – about the gods, about death, about what actually brings pleasure – that cause people to pursue things that generate more pain than pleasure and to fear things that are not genuinely harmful.

This is a fundamental difference in starting point and it generates fundamentally different practical conclusions. The Epicurean is not detaching from pleasure in order to escape suffering. He is reasoning clearly about which experiences bring the most net pleasure and which apparently-desirable experiences conceal greater pains, in order to maximize the actual happiness available in a natural life. He remains fully engaged with the world of sensation, friendship, and active pleasure – because these are the sources of genuine happiness, not obstacles to it.

**The impermanence question.** Buddhism treats the impermanence of all conditioned things (*anicca*) as one of the three marks of existence and as a source of dukkha: we suffer because we become attached to things that do not last. The Buddhist response is to cultivate non-attachment – to see clearly that nothing permanent can be found in the conditioned world and to release the craving for permanence.

For Epicurus, the impermanence of things is not a source of suffering but simply a fact about the natural world – and a fact that carries no negative implication. The flower is not less beautiful for being temporary. The pleasure of friendship is not diminished by the knowledge that it will end. The wise person understands that pleasure does not need to be permanent to be genuine, and that the attempt to cling to pleasures beyond their natural duration generates more pain

than the pleasures themselves are worth. But this is a counsel of clear-eyed appreciation, not of non-attachment. Epicurus explicitly valued the memory of past pleasures as a source of present happiness and anticipated future pleasures as a source of present joy. He was deeply attached to his friends and said so without apology.

The Buddhist framework reads the Epicurean counsel against the anxious pursuit of fame and power as a form of non-attachment, and finds in the Epicurean community of the Garden a parallel to the Sangha. These surface resemblances are misleading. The philosophical justifications are entirely different, and the conclusions diverge at the most important points: Epicurus is not counseling detachment from the world but *intelligent engagement* with it; not the cessation of desire but the *rational cultivation* of the desires that actually produce happiness; not liberation from impermanent becoming but the full affirmation of a natural life as sufficient for genuine happiness.

**The supernatural residue.** Many forms of Buddhism – including many of the forms most familiar to Western practitioners – carry significant metaphysical commitments that are flatly incompatible with Epicurean physics: karma, rebirth, the reality of mental states that are not reducible to physical processes, and in some traditions a rich cosmology of non-physical realms and beings. Epicurus would have treated all of these as mythology – as exactly the kind of false belief about the nature of reality that generates irrational fear and prevents genuine happiness. The soul is material and mortal. There is no rebirth. There is no karma in any metaphysical sense. The universe consists entirely of atoms and void. The reader who comes to Epicurus from a tradition that accepts these Buddhist metaphysical commitments will need to reckon honestly with the fact that Epicurean physics is not compatible with them.

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## V. What The Abrahamic Faith Community Needs To Understand

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common philosophical and theological inheritance that makes them, in many respects, the most radically incompatible traditions with Epicurean philosophy – and also, paradoxically, the communities

that stand to gain the most from an honest encounter with it. The distortions introduced by Abrahamic assumptions are severe, systematic, and deeply consequential, and they have been operating on Western readings of Epicurus for so long that they are often entirely invisible to the readers who carry them.

**The creator God problem.** All three Abrahamic religions are founded on the existence of a personal, omnipotent, omniscient God who created the universe, sustains it in being, governs it by providence, and has a will and purpose for human beings within it. This God is not a feature that can be quietly set aside while engaging with the rest of the tradition. It is the foundation on which everything else rests: the source of moral obligation, the guarantor of justice, the explainer of suffering, the basis of hope.

Epicurus rejected the existence of any such God – not on emotional grounds but on philosophical and physical grounds. The universe was not created. It has always existed, consisting eternally of atoms and void. Nothing comes from nothing. A being that created the universe from nothing is not a philosophical concept but a self-contradiction. Moreover, a being that concerns itself with human affairs – that answers prayers, punishes the wicked, rewards the just, and governs history toward a providential end – is a being in a state of anxiety and need, which is precisely the opposite of the blessed life. The gods of Epicurus exist and are worthy of reverence as models of the blessed life, but they have no more concern for human affairs than for any other arrangement of atoms. They do not create, do not intervene, do not judge, do not redeem.

The Abrahamic reader who attempts to reconcile this with their faith will find that there is no reconciliation to be had at the foundational level. Epicurean physics is not agnostic. It is not merely "secular." It is a coherent physical account of the universe that leaves no room for a creator God and no room for supernatural intervention of any kind. The honest Abrahamic reader must acknowledge this incompatibility plainly rather than attempting to import divine providence back into the philosophy through the back door.

**The afterlife and the fear of death.** One of the most practically consequential aspects of Epicurean philosophy – and one of the most consistently attacked by all three Abrahamic traditions – is the treatment of death and the afterlife. For Epicurus, death is the complete and final cessation of sensation. The soul is ma-

terial and dissolves at death just as the body does. There is no afterlife, no divine judgment, no heaven, no hell, no purgatory, no continuation of personal identity beyond the dissolution of the body. "Death is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not" (*Letter to Menoeceus*, DL 10.125).[2]

This argument is one of the most powerful and liberating in all of ancient philosophy. It does not deny that death is real, or that we have good reasons to prefer life when life contains more pleasure than pain. It denies specifically that death is something to *dread as a future state of suffering* – because suffering requires sensation, and where death is, sensation is not. The fear of divine judgment after death – which Epicurus, living before Christianity, saw operating through Greek mythology and mystery religion – is, on this account, a manufactured fear with no basis in the nature of things, and one of the primary sources of the irrational anxiety that prevents genuine happiness.

For all three Abrahamic traditions, this is not merely a philosophical disagreement but a direct challenge to a central pillar of their moral and emotional architecture. The fear of divine judgment – and the hope of divine reward – are foundational to the ethical motivation structures of these traditions. Epicurus is not proposing an alternative within a shared framework. He is dismantling the framework itself, arguing that it was built on a false account of what death is and what the gods are, and that the liberation from this fear is one of the primary achievements of genuine philosophy.

**The problem of pleasure.** No aspect of Epicurean philosophy has been more systematically distorted by Abrahamic traditions than its account of pleasure. The caricature – that Epicurus counseled a life of immediate sensory indulgence and self-gratification – was already being propagated by ancient critics in the second century before Christianity was even founded. It was enthusiastically adopted and amplified by Christian apologists, who found in "Epicurean hedonism" a convenient foil for Christian asceticism. Lactantius, one of the most influential early Christian writers, described Epicurus as attracting followers because "the word pleasure is so popular" and because "no one is immune to vices." This portrait has proven extraordinarily durable.

It is also completely false, and the falsity is provable directly from the texts. Epicurus's account of pleasure is philosophically sophisticated, and its practical implications are entirely different from the caricature. Pleasure is defined broadly as all experience that is not painful – including *not only* conventional active physical pleasures *but also* calm, rest, friendship, intellectual activity, memory of past goods, and anticipation of future goods. The wise person pursues not the *most* pleasure but the *greatest* – which requires careful reasoning about which pleasures conceal greater pains and which pains are worth accepting to achieve greater pleasures. The "natural and necessary" classification of desires is a tool for this reasoning: it shows that the foundation of happiness is generally readily available, not that we should live our entire lives on bread and water.[3] Epicurus valued fine food, wine, intellectual conversation, and friendship. He simply recognized that the anxious pursuit of unlimited wealth and fame – driven by irrational fears – generates more pain than pleasure.

The Abrahamic reader who has absorbed centuries of anti-Epicurean polemic needs to encounter this directly and honestly: the caricature of Epicurean hedonism is a weapon forged by ancient critics and sharpened by centuries of Judeo-Christian apologetics. It bears no relationship to what Epicurus actually taught.

**The cosmic moral order.** All three Abrahamic traditions are founded on the conviction that the universe has a moral order – that goodness and justice are built into the structure of things by divine will, that there is a cosmic guarantee that the wicked will eventually be punished and the righteous rewarded. This conviction is foundational to Abrahamic ethics, theodicy, and eschatology.

For Epicurus, there is no such cosmic moral order. Justice is a human compact for mutual benefit, not a divine law. The universe does not care about human virtue. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people without cosmic significance, because the universe is not arranged around human moral categories at all. The atoms fall, combine, and dissolve according to their own natures, not according to a divine moral plan. This is not a counsel of despair. It is an invitation to a different and more honest kind of moral seriousness: we pursue justice and friendship and the good life because they genuinely pro-

duce happiness for us and those we love, not because we are performing for a cosmic audience that will grade us at the end.

The Abrahamic reader who finds this disturbing rather than liberating is demonstrating exactly what Epicurus diagnosed: a life organized around the assumption of divine surveillance, divine judgment, and divine reward is a life still in the grip of the irrational fears that prevent genuine happiness. The Epicurean cure is not cynicism but clarity – the clarity of a person who has understood the nature of the universe well enough to find genuine happiness in it without requiring the universe to be something other than what it is.

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## VI. What Epicurus Actually Offers the Modern World

It would be a mistake to conclude from the foregoing that Epicurus has nothing to offer Stoics, Humanists, Buddhists, and people of Abrahamic faith. He has a great deal to offer – but only to those willing to encounter him honestly rather than through the distorting lenses of their prior commitments.

What Epicurus offers, above everything else, is a complete philosophical system built on the most fundamental and universal features of natural human experience: the feelings of pleasure and pain that Nature itself has provided to every living creature as guides to what is beneficial and what is harmful. This system does not require theological foundations that may or may not be true. It does not require universal reason that may or may not be accessible to all people. It does not require liberation from a world that may or may not be fundamentally unsatisfactory. It requires only the honest application of faculties that every human being already possesses – the senses, the accumulated patterns of experience that Epicurus called anticipations, and the feelings of pleasure and pain – to the project of living as well as it is possible to live.

This is a philosophy for the natural world, built by and for natural creatures. It takes the body seriously. It takes pleasure seriously. It takes friendship – real, particular, embodied friendship – seriously as the greatest available source of pleasure. It takes death seriously, not as a gateway to another world but as the natural end of a natural life, to be understood without terror and without denial. And it

takes the community seriously – not as the arena for the performance of duty or the accumulation of merit, but as the source of the security and friendship without which no genuinely happy life is possible.

Nietzsche (as just one example of a modern thinker who appreciated Epicurus) understood what was at stake. Against the whole tradition of life-denial – Platonic, Stoic, Christian, Kantian – he consistently invoked Epicurus as the philosopher who said yes to the world as it actually is. In *The Gay Science*, in *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Antichrist*, he returned repeatedly to Epicurus as the one ancient philosopher who had understood that the sensory world of becoming is not deficient reality but the only reality, that the natural guidance of pleasure and pain is not a base appetite to be transcended but the most honest measure of value that exists, and that a philosophy built on these foundations can produce genuine human happiness without requiring the universe to be what it is not.

The modern world has more tools for understanding Epicurus than any previous era: access to the primary texts, the developing scholarship that is recovering what ancient polemics suppressed, and an intellectual culture increasingly willing to question the theological and metaphysical foundations that have dominated Western thought for two thousand years. The opportunity is real. But it will not be realized by those who come to Epicurus determined to find a Greek Stoic, a secular Buddhist, a proto-Humanist, or a philosophical alibi for religious commitments he spent his life refuting.

It will be realized by those willing to read the texts as they are, to let the philosophy challenge their prior commitments rather than simply confirming them, and to discover in the process what Epicurus himself promised and what the long subsequent record of Epicurean lives confirms: that nature, honestly understood through the faculties nature provides, is sufficient for genuine happiness.

The Garden was not a bunker and not a monastery and not a lecture hall and not a temple. It was a camp: a community of friends working toward the shared goal of taking nature seriously and living accordingly. That model remains fully valid today.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Don't Fear, Don't Worry, Don't Bother: Why Using the Tetrapharmakon as a Summary of Epicurus Gets Everything Wrong

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Ask almost anyone who has spent time reading about Epicurean philosophy what they know about Epicurus, and a certain four-line passage will come up. It goes by the name *Tetrapharmakon* — the four-part cure — and in the standard English translation associated with D.S. Hutchinson's introduction to *The Epicurus Reader*, it reads:

*Don't fear god, Don't worry about death; What is good is easy to get, What is terrible is easy to endure.*

This passage has become, in the century or so since the Herculaneum papyri were deciphered and published, the most widely cited summary of Epicurean philosophy in popular and academic discussions. Scholar A.A. Long has described it as encapsulating Epicurus's entire philosophy. It appears on tattoos, in philosophy textbooks, in popular introductions to ancient thought, and in virtually every online article introducing Epicureanism to a new audience. Anyone who encounters Epicurus through secondary sources is almost certain to encounter this passage first.

There is just one problem: used as a summary of what Epicurus taught and what his philosophy is about, it is deeply misleading. Four short lines have done more damage to accurate understanding of Epicurean philosophy than almost any other single text — and the damage has compounded over decades as each new

writer borrowed the summary from the last. This article examines where the Tetrapharmakon actually comes from, why each of its four lines distorts the doctrine it claims to summarize, and most importantly, what Epicurean philosophy actually is when the four-line caricature is set aside.

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## What the Tetrapharmakon Actually Is — And What Philodemus May Have Been Doing With It

The first thing to establish is what this passage is and where it comes from, because the popular treatment of it consistently overstates both its authority and its clarity. Understanding the actual documentary situation changes the picture considerably — and may vindicate Philodemus rather than implicate him.

The Tetrapharmakon does not come from Epicurus. It does not appear in any of Epicurus's three surviving letters, in the Principal Doctrines, in the Vatican Sayings, or in any other text attributable to Epicurus directly. It appears nowhere in Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, the most complete ancient exposition of Epicurean physics and ethics. It does not appear in any surviving text by Metrodorus, Hermarchus, or any other direct associate of Epicurus. Diogenes of Oenoanda, who inscribed a lengthy philosophical text on a public wall in the second century CE specifically to spread Epicurean teaching, does not quote or cite it. Not a single recognized ancient Epicurean authority, in any intact text that has come down to us, ever quoted or endorsed this formulation as a summary of the philosophy.

What we actually have is a fragmentary passage from Herculaneum Papyrus 1005 — one of the thousands of charred papyri recovered from the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum, buried by Vesuvius in 79 CE. The papyrus is attributed to Philodemus of Gadara, an Epicurean philosopher who lived roughly two centuries after Epicurus. The four-line passage appears in column IV or V of the scroll.

Here is what most popular treatments omit entirely: the title and purpose of the work in which the Tetrapharmakon appears is genuinely uncertain, and that uncertainty points in a very specific and important direction.

The work survives only in its fragmentary state. Its title begins "Pros tous..." — meaning either "Against the..." or "To the..." — with the rest lost. Scholars have proposed completions including "Against the Sophists," "Against the Stoics," and "To the Companions of the School."[1] Anna Angeli, who produced the definitive modern critical edition of PHerc. 1005, titled her edition *Agli Amici di Scuola* — "To the Friends/Companions of the School" — indicating that the work was addressed to members of Epicurean groups, not to outside opponents. Her major 1986 paper on the context of the Tetrapharmakon carries the title "Compendi, eklogai e tetrapharmakos: due capitoli di dissenso nell'Epicureismo" — "Summaries, eklogai and tetrapharmakos: two chapters of *dissent within Epicureanism*." That word "dissent" is not incidental. It names a controversy internal to the Epicurean tradition about the use and misuse of summaries and compressed formulations.

The content of Angeli's edition and her 1986 *Cronache Ercolanesi* paper — as reported in scholarly reviews — makes the context clearer. Elisabetta Martelli's review of *Agli Amici di Scuola* (*Aegyptus* 69, 1989, pp. 291–292) summarizes one of the work's central concerns as follows: the papyrus addresses a strand of Epicureanism that by the second half of the second century BC was spreading the doctrine among ever wider social strata, but with tools the school at Athens did not approve — compressed summaries and epitomes that had drifted far enough from the original texts to constitute a distortion rather than an aid to understanding.[2] This was not a theoretical concern. It was the specific controversy Philodemus was engaging with in the work that contains the four-line passage.

The IEP's *Philodemus of Gadara* article, drawing on Angeli's edition and modern Herculaneum scholarship, is direct: in PHerc. 1005, "Philodemus appears to have a similar aim of setting forth the views of the early founders, and he stresses that a good Epicurean must know the contents of their works."[3] This is precisely the Philodemus who warned his community members that shortcuts are not a substitute for genuine reading — the same Philodemus whose *On Frank Speech* criticized those who failed to engage seriously with what Epicurus actually wrote.

In other words, the work in which the Tetrapharmakon appears is not simply an endorsement of the four-line formula. It is a work addressing the specific prob-

lem of oversimplification within the Epicurean community — about Epicureans who were substituting compressed summaries for genuine engagement with the primary texts.

Francesco Sbordone, whose earlier critical edition of PHerc. 1005 preceded Angeli's, went further still on this question. Sbordone argued directly that the Tetrapharmakon in the papyrus represents the position of Philodemus's *adversaries* — the oversimplifying Epicureans he was arguing against — not Philodemus's own endorsement of the formulation. On Sbordone's reading, Philodemus quoted the four-line passage precisely as an exhibit of the inadequate shortcuts that careless students were substituting for the full texts of Epicurus. This remains a minority position among scholars — Angeli attributes the composition of the Tetrapharmakon to Philodemus himself rather than to his opponents — but the context Angeli herself reconstructs is one of controversy and concern about trivialization, not of comfortable endorsement. Even on the mainstream reading, Philodemus was composing a mnemonic aide in the context of warning his community that such aides were being misused.

This reading is entirely consistent with everything else we know about Philodemus. He was one of the most prolific and rigorous Epicurean writers of the ancient world, producing detailed philosophical works on rhetoric, music, poetry, inference, the gods, and anger — all demonstrating exactly the kind of deep engagement with primary texts and philosophical argument that compressed summaries inevitably flatten. And his other major surviving work, *On Frank Speech* (analyzed by Norman DeWitt), is deeply concerned with the failure of Epicurean community members to engage seriously enough with what Epicurus actually wrote. It would be entirely in character for this Philodemus — the Philodemus who criticized insufficient study of the original texts — to hold up the four-line Tetrapharmakon as an exhibit of what that insufficient study produces.

We cannot be certain of this reading. The context immediately surrounding the passage in PHerc. 1005 is missing; the scroll is fragmentary precisely where we would most want it to be intact. But the scholarly evidence converges on a Philodemus who was writing a work addressed to Epicurean community members, deeply engaged with an internal controversy about the trivialization of Epicur-

ean doctrine through oversimplified summaries — and whose most careful scholarly interpreter argues that the four lines represent what he was criticizing, not what he was endorsing.

The correct response to this documentary situation is not to blame Philodemus for the Tetrapharmakon. It is to recognize that the popular use of these four lines as a comprehensive summary of Epicurean philosophy may itself be precisely the kind of oversimplification that Philodemus was warning against. The problem, in other words, lies not with Philodemus but with everyone since who has reached past the scholarly uncertainty, past the fragmentary state of the papyrus, past the missing context, and treated four incomplete lines as if they were the heart of a rich and demanding philosophy.

The name "Tetrapharmakon" itself — the four-drug cure, derived from an ancient medical preparation of four ingredients — cannot be traced to Epicurus or to any intact authoritative Epicurean text. According to the scholarship of Pamela Gordon (*Epicurus in Lycia*, University of Michigan Press, 1996), the name cannot be traced further back than Cicero and Philodemus, and it was applied to these four lines by modern scholars. Epicurus never labeled any four-part summary as definitive, because as far as the surviving record shows, he never produced one.

This would matter less if the four lines were at least a good summary of the first four Principal Doctrines. They are not.

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## Line One: "Don't Fear God"

The first Principal Doctrine reads in full: "The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour. For all such things exist only in the weak."[4]

Notice what Epicurus actually establishes here. He does not say only "don't be afraid of the gods." He makes a philosophical claim about the nature of genuine blessedness: a being who is truly blessed and indestructible is by definition never constrained by anger or favour, free from the need to intervene in anything, and from every kind of disturbance. The reason no divine being punishes human be-

ings or threatens them is not merely that they have chosen not to get involved. It is that intervention, anger, favoritism, and the administration of rewards and punishments are all expressions of weakness, limitation, and need — the very opposite of genuine divine blessedness. A god who could be moved to anger at human impiety would not be genuinely blessed at all.

The practical consequence of this is far larger than "don't be afraid." The full doctrine establishes that the entire framework of divine governance, divine punishment, divine reward, divine providence, and divine creation — the framework that underlies virtually every form of supernatural religion — is a philosophical impossibility, not merely a failure to have happened. Gods cannot have created the universe, because creation is an act requiring need, effort, and engagement with something outside the creator. Gods cannot supervise or judge human conduct, because supervision implies imperfection and lack. Gods cannot promise a heaven or threaten a hell, because these involve the exercise of power over others — which implies weakness, not blessedness.

"Don't fear god" captures none of this. It reduces a foundational philosophical argument about the nature of the divine, the nature of genuine blessedness, and the impossibility of supernatural interference in the natural world to a reassurance about not being scared. Worse, it leaves wide open the interpretation that gods might be benevolent, helpful, rewarding, or in some other way involved with human affairs — just not to be feared. That reading is entirely consistent with "don't fear god" and entirely incompatible with Principal Doctrine 1.[5]

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## Line Two: "Don't Worry About Death"

The second Principal Doctrine reads: "Death is nothing to us, for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us."[6]

This is one of the most carefully argued philosophical positions in all of Epicurus, and the Tetrapharmakon reduces it to a casual "don't worry about it." The damage done by this reduction is specific and serious.

Epicurus was emphatic that the correct response to death is not dismissal or indifference but active engagement. The arguments that establish why death

should not be feared need to be understood clearly, rehearsed regularly, and genuinely internalized — not set aside with a shrug. Seneca, writing in the Epicurean spirit, records: "*Wait for me but a moment, and I will pay you from my own account. Meanwhile, Epicurus will oblige me with these words: 'Think on death'...*"[7] Epicurus did not say "don't think about death" — he said think about it clearly, precisely because most people don't, and because thinking about it clearly is what transforms the relationship between the living person and time.

The reason that thinking about death clearly is therapeutic rather than morbid is that it redirects attention to the present in a specific and powerful way. Vatican Saying 14 makes this explicit: "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 without allowing himself leisure."[8] This is not "don't worry about death." It is the opposite: think about death directly, use that understanding to recognize that life is genuinely finite and genuinely yours, and from that recognition build the urgency and appreciation that make it possible to actually live fully rather than half-live in anxious postponement.

"Don't worry about death" encourages exactly the vague dismissal that Epicurus was working against. It sounds like advice to push the subject away rather than to engage it clearly. The person who follows this advice as it is usually read will continue to carry the background anxiety about mortality that distorts so many decisions — they will simply be told not to think about it. That is not Epicurean therapy. That is a prescription for the unexamined life.

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## Line Three: "What Is Good Is Easy To Get"

Of the four lines, this one has probably turned more potential students away from Epicurean philosophy than any other, and for entirely understandable reasons. Everyone who has lived more than a few years knows that the good things in life — genuine friendship, meaningful work, good health, the pleasures of love and family and beautiful experience — require effort, attention, and sometimes considerable struggle to achieve and maintain. Telling anyone with genuine life experience that "what is good is easy to get" sounds either naive or dishonest.

The third Principal Doctrine does not say this. It reads: "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."[9]

This is not a cheerful reassurance that good things are easy. It is a philosophical argument about the structure of pleasure — specifically, that pleasure has a determinate limit, and that that limit is reached when the absence of pain is complete. The point of this doctrine was not to reassure beginners that life is simple. It was to refute the Platonic argument, dominant in ancient philosophy, that pleasure could not be the guide of life because it was unlimited in nature — that the more you had, the more you wanted, and therefore the pursuit of pleasure led inevitably into the infinite regress of unfulfillable desire.

Epicurus answered that this argument was wrong about the structure of pleasure. Pleasure does have a limit: the complete absence of pain. When that condition is achieved — when a person is free from bodily suffering and mental disturbance — no additional pleasure makes the situation qualitatively better, only more varied. This is the doctrine that Cicero's Torquatus expressed when he said there is nothing preferable to "a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures" — the "crammed full" is important, because the doctrine is about the full positive life, not the minimal life.[10]

None of this has anything to do with "what is good is easy to get." The doctrine is about the structure and limits of pleasure, not about the difficulty or ease of achieving the good life. And it is worth saying directly: the good life, as Epicurus describes it, requires sustained effort. The Letter to Menoeceus itself closes by saying "Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day" Practice is required.[11] Understanding is required. Sustained philosophical engagement is required. Friendship must be built and maintained. Desires must be examined and calibrated. The natural and necessary must be distinguished from the empty. None of this is easy in the sense of requiring no effort. What Epicurus actually claimed was more specific and more interesting: nature has made the things that are genuinely necessary for happiness available to be obtained, in contrast to the things generated by empty opinion, which are unlim-

ited and therefore impossible to satisfy. That is a very different claim from "what is good is easy to get," and a much more defensible one.

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## Line Four: "What Is Terrible Is Easy To Endure"

This line is the most damaging of the four, and the damage it does is the most directly personal to anyone who encounters it during a time of genuine suffering. The fourth Principal Doctrine reads: "Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh."[12]

This is a careful empirical observation about the natural history of pain, offered with genuine compassion for human suffering. It is not a breezy dismissal. Epicurus knew what serious pain was — he wrote his famous letter to Idomeneus from his deathbed, describing severe physical suffering, while in the same breath affirming the joy that philosophical memory and friendship still provided. He was not pretending pain did not hurt.

The philosophical purpose of Principal Doctrine 4 is to establish, in precise parallel with Doctrine 3, that pain does not have an unlimited upper bound that makes it unconquerable.[13] Just as pleasure reaches a limit (the absence of all pain), so pain has limits of its own: extreme pain tends to be brief, and extended suffering tends to be less extreme. This is not a consolation prize. It is a structural argument that pain, like pleasure, operates within natural limits that the understanding of nature can identify and use. The person who has genuinely understood this is not telling themselves that what hurts doesn't hurt — they are equipped with an accurate picture of what pain actually is, which is a different and more genuinely useful thing.

"What is terrible is easy to endure" sounds glib in a way that would be insulting to anyone in real pain. It sounds like the kind of thing said by people who have never experienced serious suffering, or who want to dismiss the genuine difficulty of human experience. It is precisely the kind of formulation that makes people say "Epicurus sounds like he didn't take suffering seriously" — when the

opposite is true. Lucretius, Epicurus's most faithful interpreter, was moved enough by the suffering of animals to describe at length the grief of a cow who had lost her calf. A philosophy of that quality of compassion for natural beings is not one that casually announces that terrible things are easy to endure.

The two doctrines together — 3 and 4 — make a single argument: pleasure has a determinate limit that can be reached and is therefore a viable guide of life, and pain has natural limits that make it something to be understood and met rather than either ignored or collapsed under. The Tetrapharmakon splits this into two separate casual reassurances and strips both of their philosophical content.

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## The Missing Center: Pleasure

There is one thing conspicuously absent from the Tetrapharmakon. In four lines supposedly summarizing the core of Epicurean philosophy, the word "pleasure" does not appear. Not once. The positive goal of Epicurean life — the reason any of the four doctrines matters, the thing they all exist to clear the ground for — is entirely absent.

This is not a minor omission. Pleasure is the beginning and end of Epicurean ethics. Epicurus is explicit: "We recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good." (Letter to Menoeceus 128) Lucretius opens the entire *De Rerum Natura* with a magnificent hymn to Venus as the embodiment of the creative, pleasurable force that animates all of nature.[14] The Principal Doctrines and the Vatican Sayings return to pleasure again and again as the natural goal that every element of the philosophy serves.

A four-line summary of Epicurean philosophy that does not contain the word "pleasure" is not a summary of Epicurean philosophy. It is a list of four things not to be bothered about. It presents Epicureanism as a program of anxiety reduction rather than as a philosophy of genuine positive happiness through pleasure. These are not the same thing, and the difference matters enormously for how the philosophy is understood and used.

The person who learns Epicurus through the Tetrapharmakon learns that Epicureans don't fear god, don't worry about death, believe good things are accessible, and believe pain is manageable. They have no idea that the central claim of the philosophy is that pleasure is the natural guide of life — that every living creature from its first moment seeks pleasure and avoids pain as the natural testimony of what is beneficial and harmful — and that the entire Epicurean project of understanding nature, clearing away false beliefs, and building genuine friendships is in service of a genuinely positive and pleasurable life.

This is why so many people who encounter Epicurus through secondary sources that rely on the Tetrapharmakon come away thinking Epicurus sounds vaguely Buddhist, or Stoic, or simply like a sensible person advising against excessive anxiety. He sounds like none of these things when read in full. He sounds like the boldest and most honest defender of human pleasure that ancient philosophy produced.

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## Why This Formulation Has Dominated — And Why That Is a Problem

If the Tetrapharmakon is as problematic as this article argues, why has it come to dominate discussions of Epicurean philosophy for the past century?

Several factors converge. The physical drama of the Herculaneum papyri — charred, fragile, deciphered over generations of painstaking scholarship — gives their contents an aura of significance that can outrun their actual evidential weight. A four-line passage that survives from a buried scroll feels like a discovered treasure, and treasures get cited. The formulation is also memorable and portable in a way that the full texts are not: four short lines fit in a tweet, on a poster, in an introductory paragraph. This portability has been an enormous advantage in the age of digital media.

There is also a deeper reason. The Tetrapharmakon, as it is typically read, presents an Epicurean philosophy that is comfortable for people who are not really comfortable with pleasure as the highest good. "Don't fear god" can be read as agnostic piety. "Don't worry about death" can be read as Stoic equanim-

ity. "Good is easy to get" can be read as a call to simple living that has more in common with Cynic austerity than with Epicurean abundance. "Evil is easy to endure" can be read as the Stoic doctrine that virtue is sufficient for happiness under any conditions. Read this way, the Tetrapharmakon presents an Epicureanism that has been safely defused — a philosophy with all the pleasure removed, suitable for commentators who find Epicurus interesting but remain uncomfortable with his actual central claim.

As Cassius Amicus observed in the EpicureanFriends.com discussion of this passage: "The formulation does not mention 'pleasure' at all, which is probably the main reason it goes down so well with those who interpret Epicurus as consistent with the Stoics." The Tetrapharmakon has become the vehicle by which Epicurus is quietly Stoicized — translated into a philosophy of endurance and anxiety reduction rather than a philosophy of pleasure and happiness.



## What To Do With It

None of this means the Tetrapharmakon has no value at all, and it would be unrealistic to pretend that it can simply be set aside when it is already so widely known. It is so well established in popular discussions of Epicurean philosophy that anyone engaging seriously with the philosophy will have to deal with it.

The appropriate response is to treat it as what it most plausibly is: a compressed mnemonic aide at best, and at worst an inadequate shorthand that collapses rich philosophical argument into casual reassurance. It is useful in the way that a nursery rhyme about the alphabet is useful — it gives beginners a starting point — but just as the rhyme is not a course in reading and writing, the Tetrapharmakon is not a course in Epicurean philosophy. As Elli Pensa observed in the EpicureanFriends.com discussion: "The tetrapharmakos is that kind of schooling as it is for little children when they are starting nursery school. Where is our alpha and omega — where is pleasure inside the tetrapharmakos? It does not exist."

Every person who encounters the Tetrapharmakon as an introduction to Epicurus should immediately be directed to the primary texts: the Letter to Menoeceus,

the Principal Doctrines, the Vatican Sayings, and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. These are not long or difficult documents. The Letter to Menoeceus can be read in thirty minutes. Reading it makes immediately clear that Epicurean philosophy is not a list of four anxieties to be dismissed but a comprehensive, positive, and deeply humane account of how to live well — grounded in pleasure as the natural guide of life, enriched by genuine friendship as the greatest good wisdom can provide, and illuminated by the understanding of nature that frees the mind from every groundless fear.

That is the philosophy Epicurus taught. It is not four lines on a fragment of charred papyrus. It is the full body of his thought, available to anyone willing to read it, and it is far more interesting, more demanding, and more genuinely life-affirming than the four-line reduction suggests.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# A Tribute to Norman DeWitt and His Epicurus and His Philosophy

If there is one book that directly inspired the EpicurusToday project — one scholar whose reading of Epicurus confirmed that the mainstream interpretation was wrong and that a better one was possible — it is Norman DeWitt, and his 1954 work *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, published by the University of Minnesota Press.

This page is both a recommendation and a tribute. DeWitt deserves both.



## Who Was Norman DeWitt?

Norman Wentworth DeWitt was a professor of Latin at Victoria College, University of Toronto, who spent a career studying the ancient world and came to Epicurus late enough in his scholarly life to bring a fully formed classical education to bear on the question of what the philosophy actually said. He published *Epicurus and His Philosophy* in 1954, the same year as its companion volume *St. Paul and Epicurus*, and then largely disappeared from the bibliographies of subsequent Epicurean scholarship.

That disappearance is worth noting. DeWitt is rarely cited by modern academic commentators on Epicurus. When he is cited, it is often to register disagreement. His reading of Epicurus cuts too sharply against the grain of mainstream classical scholarship to be comfortable for those who have invested in the conventional interpretation — the one that domesticates Epicurus into a philosopher of withdrawal, minimal desire, and therapeutic calm. DeWitt will have none of that, and the academy, by and large, has not forgiven him for it.

For the purposes of EpicurusToday, however, that is precisely what makes him valuable.

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## What Makes the Book Extraordinary

*Epicurus and His Philosophy* was among the first comprehensive treatments of Epicurus in modern English. That alone would make it historically significant. But what distinguishes it from everything that came before — and most of what has come after — is the ambition and coherence of its central argument.

DeWitt's thesis is that Epicurus was not the minor, eccentric, garden-variety hedonist of popular caricature, nor the quietist philosopher of serene contentment that the modern self-help tradition has made of him. He was the founder of the first genuinely systematic philosophy of human happiness built on a materialist account of the world — a philosopher who taught his doctrines with the organizational discipline of a school, the emotional warmth of a community, and the conviction that what he had discovered was urgently needed by ordinary human beings who had been frightened into misery by false beliefs about the gods and death.

DeWitt demonstrates the fallacy of centuries of abuse of Epicurus and the resulting distortion of most discussions of Epicureanism that appear in standard philosophical works. He does this not through polemics but through sustained, detailed engagement with the Greek and Latin sources — the letters, the doctrines, the ancient testimonia — read with the eyes of a classical scholar who takes the texts seriously rather than filtering them through the accumulated prejudices of twenty-three centuries of hostile commentary.

The book is organized in a way DeWitt says Epicurus himself organized his teaching: beginning with a broad overview and then filling in the details. Epicurus thought of his writings as maps drawn to larger and smaller scales, and the process of learning was regarded as a progression from general maps with few details to regional maps with a proportionate increase in detail. DeWitt applies the same method, giving the reader the sweep of the philosophy before pressing into the specifics of physics, canonics, and ethics. The result is a book that rewards

both the newcomer who wants to understand Epicurus quickly and the more experienced reader who wants the full treatment.

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## How DeWitt Opens: A Warning Every Reader Needs

One of the most valuable things DeWitt does — and one of the things that sets his book apart from almost every other treatment of Epicurus — is what he does in his very first chapter. Before presenting the philosophy itself, he prepares the reader for the problem they are about to encounter.

The second sentence of DeWitt's Chapter One reads as follows:

> At the very outset the reader should be prepared to think of [Epicurus] at one and the same time as the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in the Graeco-Roman world.

This is not rhetorical flourish. It is an accurate description of the ancient record, and it has direct consequences for how every piece of ancient testimony about Epicurus must be read. The philosophers who hated Epicurus most bitterly — Platonists, Stoics, and later the Christian writers who absorbed their traditions — were also the philosophers who wrote the most about him. The result is that a very large proportion of the surviving ancient commentary on Epicurus comes from people who despised him, wanted to refute him, and had strong ideological reasons to misrepresent his views.

DeWitt makes clear from the outset that this is not a minor caveat to be noted and set aside. It is the central challenge facing anyone who tries to understand Epicurus from the historical record. Every time a Stoic or a Platonic or a Christian writer tells you what Epicurus believed, you are reading someone who had powerful reasons to get it wrong — and who, in many cases, demonstrably did. The tradition of representing Epicurus as a vulgar sensualist who recommended indulgence in food, drink, and sexual pleasure was built deliberately by his enemies, and it was so effective that it survived long enough to become the popular meaning of the English word *epicure*. The tradition of representing him as a quiet garden philosopher content with bread and water was built partly by well-meaning later followers who had absorbed Platonic and Stoic assumptions

without realizing it, and partly by hostile commentators who preferred a harmless Epicurus to a challenging one.

Against both of these traditions, DeWitt insists on returning to what Epicurus himself wrote, read as carefully and as charitably as the texts of any other major philosopher. That insistence, stated plainly in the opening chapter, is the methodological foundation of everything that follows — and it is the same insistence that animates EpicurusToday. Read Epicurus himself. Read the commentators with awareness of who they were and what they had to gain from a particular interpretation. And when the hostile tradition contradicts what the primary sources actually say, follow the primary sources.

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## Why DeWitt Matters for EpicurusToday

The EpicurusToday project did not begin with DeWitt — it began with the texts of Epicurus and Lucretrius and grew through engagement on modern social media. But DeWitt was the scholar who confirmed, in systematic and scholarly detail, that the reading of Epicurus that felt right from the primary sources was not an eccentric personal interpretation but a defensible academic position with genuine textual support.

That matters because the mainstream interpretation of Epicurus — the one you will find in most philosophy textbooks, most academic journals, and most popular treatments — consistently underplays pleasure as the active goal of life, overemphasizes tranquility and the removal of desire as the philosophical program, and presents Epicurus as a philosopher of managed contentment rather than full engagement. DeWitt saw through this and said so, in print, with documentation.

He is not popular with mainstream commentators precisely because he is right about this, and because being right about it requires acknowledging that centuries of scholarly tradition have been systematically wrong. That is not a comfortable position for any academic tradition to accept. But it is the position the texts support, and it is the position that EpicurusToday is built on.

We cite DeWitt regularly in these pages. We recommend his book as the single best starting point for anyone who wants to understand Epicurus as he actually was rather than as he has been misrepresented. And we pay tribute to him here because he deserves recognition that the mainstream of classical scholarship has not given him.

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## A Note on Epicurus and Early Christianity

Readers who open *Epicurus and His Philosophy* expecting a straightforward philosophical treatise will find, particularly in certain chapters, sustained engagement with the question of the relationship between ancient Epicureanism and early Christianity. DeWitt argues — carefully and with extensive documentation — that Epicurean ideas and vocabulary were a significant influence on the language and thought of early Christian writers, including Paul. The Epicurean ethic, which allied happiness with pleasure, was so appealing and so widely acknowledged that Paul had no choice but to deal with it from the perspective of religion — adapting certain aspects while cursing others.

DeWitt pursued this line of argument so extensively that he wrote a separate companion volume — *St. Paul and Epicurus*, also published in 1954 — dedicated entirely to the question of Epicurean influence on the Pauline epistles.

Some readers will find this material less interesting than the core philosophical analysis. If that is your experience, you can read past those sections without losing the thread of the argument about Epicurus himself. But for many readers this dimension of the book adds rather than detracts. It is a reminder that Epicurean philosophy was not a museum piece in the ancient world but a living, influential tradition whose ideas permeated the Mediterranean world in ways that have not been fully acknowledged. For those interested in the relationship between ancient philosophy and religious tradition, DeWitt's work opens a genuinely fascinating window.

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## How to Get the Book

*Epicurus and His Philosophy* is available in print through the University of Minnesota Press's Minnesota Archive Editions series, which has kept it in print in paperback. It is also available at the Internet Archive, where the full text can be read online without charge.

There is no better single investment a student of Epicurean philosophy can make than reading this book. Start with the first three chapters to get the overview, and then follow wherever your interest takes you. You will not find a more thorough, more honest, or more intellectually courageous treatment of Epicurus anywhere in the literature.

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# About the Content of EpicurusToday.com

The content of EpicurusToday.com is curated, reviewed, and editorially approved by Cassius Amicus, who has been the administator of NewEpicurean.com since 2010 and the EpicureanFriends.com forum since 2015. Cassius Amicus is solely responsible for everything published here. That responsibility is real, unqualified, and not shared with any institution, publisher, or automated system. But the question of where the content comes from — and how much any single person can honestly claim to have originated — deserves a straight answer, and this page provides one.



## How This Content Is Produced

No single human being invents all the words in a work of scholarship or editorial synthesis from scratch. Every writer on philosophy draws on translators, commentators, primary sources, reference works, and the accumulated thinking of other people who have spent time on the same questions. The content of EpicurusToday is no different in kind from what you would find in a well-edited encyclopedia article, a careful reference work, or the kind of thorough synthesis that a knowledgeable writer produces by combining deep familiarity with primary sources, engagement with the best available secondary literature, and years of community discussion and testing of ideas against other serious readers.

What is different here — and what should be stated plainly — is that the drafting of articles on this site has been assisted by AI, specifically Claude AI. Artificial intelligence has been used as a research and drafting tool: to help organize arguments, draft explanatory prose, check the internal consistency of analysis, and

ensure that the connection between primary Epicurean texts and the editorial conclusions being drawn is as tight and well-supported as possible.

This is not a secret, and it is not something to be embarrassed about. Using AI as a drafting and research assistant is not fundamentally different from relying on an encyclopedia, a dictionary of classical philosophy, or a research database. In each case, the human editor is responsible for selecting what is used, verifying what is claimed, approving what is published, and standing behind the result. That is what happens here.

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## What "Cassius Amicus Is Solely Responsible" Actually Means

When we say that Cassius Amicus is solely responsible for the content of EpicurusToday, we mean several specific things:

Every article on this site reflects editorial judgment about what Epicurean philosophy actually teaches, how it has been misrepresented, and what the correct reading of the primary sources is. Those judgments are not the output of any algorithm. They are the result of more than a decade of close study of the primary texts — the letters of Epicurus, the works of Lucretius, Diogenes Laertius Book 10, the inscriptions of Diogenes of Oinoanda, and the relevant passages of Cicero — together with engagement with the most important modern scholarship, including above all Norman DeWitt's *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, and sustained discussion and debate with the community at EpicureanFriends.com.

The specific positions taken on this site — that pleasure, not ataraxia, is the Epicurean goal; that the Tetrapharmakon is not a reliable summary of the philosophy; that DeWitt's reading of Epicurus is closer to the primary sources than most academic consensus; that the five adulterating traditions have systematically distorted the reception of Epicurus — these are not AI-generated opinions. They are positions arrived at through years of engagement with the sources and the community, defended and tested in discussion, and committed to because the evidence supports them.

What AI contributes is the drafting: the organization of those positions into readable prose, the checking of internal consistency, the synthesis of relevant

sources into accessible explanations. The positions themselves, the editorial decisions about what to include and what to reject, and the final approval of everything published — those are human, and they are Cassius Amicus's.

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## On the Reliability of the Content

This site aims at the highest possible accuracy on the questions that matter most: what Epicurus actually taught, what the primary sources actually say, and where the mainstream reception of Epicurus has gone wrong. On those foundational questions, the content here is the result of sustained research and has been tested against serious scrutiny.

On the other hand, any site of this scope and ambition, produced by a small team without a large editorial apparatus, will contain errors of detail. Dates, names, specific textual citations, minor historical claims — these are places where mistakes are possible and in fact likely over the course of a large body of content. We do not regard this as a disqualifying flaw. Wikipedia, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and the most careful academic publications all contain errors that are identified and corrected over time. The appropriate standard is not perfection on first publication but ongoing review and correction when errors are identified.

All content on this site is subject to ongoing review. If you find a factual error, a mistaken citation, or a claim that seems inconsistent with the primary sources, we want to know. Corrections and updates can be submitted through the EpicureanFriends.com forum, where ongoing discussion of all topics covered on this site continues. Identified errors will be corrected, and the correction will be noted.

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## Why We Publish Without Waiting for Perfection

The restoration of authentic Epicurean philosophy against twenty-three centuries of misrepresentation, domestication, and outright hostility is not a project that can wait for the perfect moment to begin, or the perfectly verified article to

publish. The philosophy of Epicurus has been misrepresented for so long, by so many influential voices, that simply getting accurate information into circulation — available, accessible, clearly argued — is itself a contribution worth making now rather than later.

Vatican Saying 14 says it more directly than we can: *"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 without allowing himself leisure."*[1]

Epicurus was not speaking about website publication schedules. But the principle applies: the urgency of the project is real, the time available is finite, and the people who might benefit from access to this philosophy are alive now, not in some future moment when every detail has been verified to the satisfaction of every possible critic. We publish what we have, we stand behind it, we improve it as we can, and we keep going.

EpicurusToday is not the last word on Epicurean philosophy. It is a contribution to an ongoing project of recovery and restoration — one that has been running for more than ten years at EpicureanFriends.com, that has produced a community of serious readers and discussants, and that continues to develop as the primary sources are read more carefully, the scholarship is engaged more thoroughly, and the arguments are tested more rigorously against all comers.

We welcome your engagement with that project. The forum at EpicureanFriends.com is the place for it.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Jefferson's Epicurus: How America's Philosopher-President Embodied the Fifteen Core Doctrines

The history of Epicurean philosophy is in large part the history of its suppression. For twenty-three centuries, the tradition has been calumniated by Stoics, domesticated by Humanists, and buried under Platonic theology dressed in Christian clothing. Epicurus became, in the popular imagination, either a crude hedonist who recommended indulgence in bodily pleasure, or a quiet ascetic who advocated withdrawal from the world — two opposite caricatures that between them ensured that the actual philosophy never had to be confronted on its own terms.

That this outcome was not inevitable — that an educated person in the Western tradition could read the primary sources, understand Epicurus correctly, endorse his philosophy explicitly and by name, and fight for it against both Platonism and organized religion — is demonstrated by one of the most important public figures in American history.

Thomas Jefferson stated plainly, in a letter to his friend William Short on October 31, 1819: *"As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us."*[1]

He was not being modest. In the same letter he called Stoic calumnies of Epicurus a "great crime," identified Cicero as an accomplice in those calumnies, and traced the ruin of Christian theology to its incorporation of Platonic "mysticisms incomprehensible to the human mind."[2] He wrote in 1816 to Charles Thomson that the Epicurean system was, "notwithstanding the calumnies of the

Stoics and caricatures of Cicero, the most rational system remaining of the philosophy of the ancients."[3]

Jefferson had multiple copies of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, had studied Gassendi's translation of the *Life of Epicurus* by Diogenes Laertius, and compiled his own "Syllabus of the Doctrines of Epicurus" — a document he attached to the Short letter as a reference.[4] He was not a dilettante who encountered Epicurus late in life and nodded at him approvingly. He was a close and deliberate student of the primary texts who understood what he was endorsing.

What follows is a walk through the fifteen core doctrines of Classical Epicurean philosophy, in the order in which we identify them as the heart of the system, with Jefferson's own words demonstrating his understanding and endorsement of each.

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## Part One: Natural Science (Physics)

### 1. Nothing Comes From Nothing or Goes To Nothing Supernaturally. Everything Happens Naturally From the Motion of Atoms Through Space.

Jefferson's Syllabus of the Doctrines of Epicurus states at the head of its physical section: *"The Universe eternal. Its parts, great and small, interchangeable. Matter and Void alone. Motion inherent in matter, which is weighty & declining. Eternal circulation of the elements of bodies."*[5]

This is precisely the Epicurean position that Lucretius argues at the opening of *De Rerum Natura*: the universe has always existed and will always exist, its material content is conserved, and everything that happens follows from the natural motion of matter through space. No supernatural creation, no supernatural destruction, no divine intervention in the processes of nature.

Jefferson confirmed his personal commitment to this position in his letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820, where he wrote: *"I feel: therefore I exist. I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them* matter. *I feel them changing place. This gives me* motion. *Where there is an absence of matter, I*

*call it* void, *or* nothing, *or* immaterial space. *On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need."*[6]

The Epicurean formulation could not be stated more cleanly. Matter, void, motion: the complete physical ontology on which Lucretius built *De Rerum Natura* and on which Epicurus grounded everything else.

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**2. The Universe Is Infinite In Size And Eternal In Time And Has No Gods Over It. There Is No Supernatural Design Or Existence Outside Of Nature.**

Jefferson's Syllabus is explicit: *"The Universe eternal."*[7] And in the same letter he attached the Syllabus, he identified Plato and his theological heirs as the source of the supernatural framework that Epicurus was built to oppose. To his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, Jefferson wrote that when examining religious claims, "those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of Nature, must be examined with more care," and that the authority of a writer claiming divine inspiration must be assessed by the same standards of evidence as any other claim.[8]

In the Adams letter of 1820, Jefferson made the nature of his materialism unmistakable: *"To talk of* immaterial *existences is to talk of* nothings. *To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are* nothings, *or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise."*[9]

A universe without immaterial existences is a universe without supernatural governors — which is the Epicurean universe precisely.

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**3. True Divinity Is Incorruptible And Blessed. Beings Which Are Divine Do Not Reward Friends And Punish Enemies Or Intervene In Human Affairs.**

Jefferson's Syllabus states of the gods: *"Gods, an order of beings next superior to man, enjoying in their sphere their own felicities, but not meddling with the concerns of the scale of beings below them."*[10]

The phrase "not meddling" is the entire Epicurean theological position in two words. The gods are blessed, self-sufficient, incorruptible — and therefore have no anger, no favor, no interest in human affairs. Jefferson understood this and stated it as a core Epicurean doctrine.

To Peter Carr he wrote that reason must be the standard even for theological questions: *"Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear."*[11] A god who approves rational inquiry rather than requiring submission to fear is not the god of divine wrath and punishment — it is a conception of divinity entirely consistent with the Epicurean account of beings dwelling in perfect felicity, undisturbed by the affairs of lesser creatures.

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**4. Death Is Nothing To Us. When We Die We Cease To Exist.**

Jefferson returned repeatedly to the Epicurean account of death as the end of sensation. In the letter to Adams of August 1820, after establishing that matter and void are all that exist, he drew the direct consequence: immaterial souls are "nothings." In the same letter he expressed his personal equanimity about death with a Latin quotation — *"qui summum nec metuit diem nec optat"* ("who neither fears nor desires his last day") — which he applied to himself in the letter to Charles Thomson in 1816.[12]

But the most direct statement appears in the letter to William Short, where Jefferson described his own state of mind as "the consolations of a sound philosophy, equally indifferent to hope and fear."[13] Hope of an afterlife and fear of divine punishment — the two forces that the Epicurean account of death was designed to eliminate — are both equally dismissed. The philosophical consolation is not hope for something better after death. It is the understanding that there is nothing to fear in what comes after.

In a letter to John Adams in 1816, Jefferson wrote of death in terms that echo Epicurus directly: "There is a ripeness of time for death, regarding others as well as ourselves, when it is reasonable we should drop off, and make room for another growth. When we have lived our generation out, we should not wish to encroach on another."[14]

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### 5. There Is No Necessity To Live Under the Control of Necessity. There Is No Fate Or Destiny — We Decide How We Live.

Jefferson's Syllabus records: *"Man is a free agent."*[15] These four words place him squarely in the Epicurean tradition that Epicurus built the atomic swerve to defend — the insistence that human choice is real, that the universe is not a machine of iron necessity, and that a life directed by reason toward genuine goods is not merely the playing out of a script written before we were born.

Jefferson demonstrated his commitment to free agency not just philosophically but through every major act of his public life. The Declaration of Independence, which he drafted, rests on the Epicurean premise that humans are capable of deciding how they live and governing themselves accordingly. In the letter to Justice Johnson in 1823, he described the founding generation's belief that *"man was a rational animal, endowed by nature with rights and with an innate sense of justice; and that he could be restrained from wrong and protected in right by moderate powers confided to persons of his own choice."*[16]

Persons of their own choice — not assigned by fate, not determined by birth, not governed by divine necessity. This is the free-agent premise of Epicurean ethics applied to political theory.

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## Part Two: The Theory of Knowledge (Canonics)

### 6. He Who Says Nothing Can Be Known Knows Nothing. Knowledge Of Reality Is Possible.

Jefferson's rejection of radical skepticism is emphatic and consistent. In the Adams letter of 1820, after establishing the foundation of matter, void, and motion through sensation, he wrote: *"Rejecting all organs of information therefore but my senses, I rid myself of the Pyrrhonisms with which an indulgence in speculations hyperphysical and antiphysical so uselessly occupy and disquiet the mind."*[17]

Pyrrhonism — the ancient tradition of radical skepticism that held nothing could be known — was the same target that Epicurus attacked in the Canon. Jef-

ferson's rejection of it is explicit and uses its technical name. He continued: *"A single sense may indeed be sometimes deceived, but rarely: and never all our senses together, with their faculty of reasoning. They evidence realities; and there are enough of these for all the purposes of life, without plunging into the fathomless abyss of dreams and phantasms."*[18]

This is precisely the Epicurean account: sensation is reliable, reality is knowable, and the person who insists on radical uncertainty has produced nothing but unnecessary distress.

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### 7. All Sensations Are True. Error Is In The Mind And Not The Senses.

Jefferson's statement in the Adams letter — *"On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need"* — affirms sensation as the foundation of knowledge.[19] But the more precise Epicurean point — that error enters through the mind's addition of false opinion on top of accurate sensation — appears in his consistent practice of distinguishing between what sensation reports and what abstract reasoning adds.

The entire critique of Plato that Jefferson mounted across his letters rests on this distinction. When Jefferson wrote to Adams in 1814 that Plato's *Republic* was full of *"whimsies, puerilities, and unintelligible jargon"*, and that *"nonsense can never be explained"*, he was identifying the Platonic method of abstract conceptual construction — reasoning about eternal Forms detached from sensory reality — as the source of the unintelligible results.[20] The senses report accurately; the Platonic mind adds constructions "incomprehensible to the human mind" to what sensation provides, and the result is the fog for which Jefferson had such contempt.[21]

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### 8. The Criteria of Truth Are The Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings. These Natural Faculties Connect Us With Reality.

Jefferson's clearest statement of the Epicurean three-criteria theory of knowledge appears in the letter to Peter Carr in 1787, where he described what he called the "moral sense":

*"He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them? Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his Nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm."*[22]

And crucially: *"State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."*[23]

The "moral sense" Jefferson describes is the Epicurean faculty of feelings (*pathē*) — the natural instrument that every human being possesses by virtue of being alive, which connects them directly with what is genuinely good and genuinely harmful. The "anticipations" (*prolēpseis*) — the pre-formed concepts that accumulated experience builds in every mind — appear in his observation that this faculty is given to all, is "as much a part of man as his leg or arm," and enables the ploughman to reason correctly where the professor, misled by "artificial rules," fails.[24] The point that a great philosophical apparatus is not required for reliable moral judgment is directly Epicurean.

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**9. Dialectical Logic And Radical Skepticism Do Not Determine Truth. Reasoning Must Be Grounded In The Perceptions Of Our Natural Faculties.**

Jefferson's contempt for the dialectical method — reasoning that proceeds through abstract logical construction independently of sensory experience — is on display throughout his letters. Of Plato he wrote that his *"foggy mind is forever presenting the semblances of objects which, half seen through a mist, can be defined neither in form nor dimensions."*[25] Of the method itself, he wrote to Adams in 1820 that once you "quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind."[26]

The rejection of abstract dialectic as a path to truth, and the grounding of all genuine reasoning in what the senses actually report, is the core of the Epicurean

Canon and the specific point on which Epicurus broke from Plato most decisively. Jefferson's repeated insistence on sensation as the foundation, and his consistent mockery of reasoning that floats free of sensory grounding, places him precisely on the Epicurean side of this ancient dispute.

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### 10. Platonic Ideal Forms, Aristotelian Essences, And Divine Revelation Do Not Exist. All Truth Exists In This World.

Jefferson attacked Platonic "ideal forms" — existences beyond the natural world — with a directness that rarely appears in polite philosophical discourse. In the Adams letter of 1820: *"To talk of* immaterial *existences is to talk of* nothings."[27] In the Adams letter of 1814: Plato was "one of the race of genuine sophists" whose "foggy mind" produced material that "should have consigned him to early oblivion."[28]

On divine revelation specifically, Jefferson was equally direct. To Carr in 1787, he advised treating biblical claims by the same evidentiary standards as any historical claim, and examining supernatural assertions — a sun standing still for hours, a virgin birth — against the laws of nature rather than accepting them on the authority of a writer claiming divine inspiration.

The Epicurean insistence that all truth exists in this world — that there are no Forms beyond nature, no divine revelations that override what sensation and reason establish, no "true world" behind the world we experience — is Jefferson's consistent position across decades of private correspondence.

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## Part Three: Ethics

### 11. Happiness Is the Goal of Life. A Life Of Happiness Is A Life In Which Pleasure Predominates Over Pain.

Jefferson's Syllabus states without qualification: *"Happiness the aim of life."*[29] And the Declaration of Independence, which he drafted, enshrined *"the pursuit of Happiness"* as one of the three fundamental purposes for which governments

are instituted — placing happiness alongside life and liberty as the natural rights that political arrangements exist to protect.

The choice of "happiness" rather than "property" — the term used in other founding documents — was deliberate. Jefferson knew the philosophical tradition on which he was drawing. Happiness as the aim of life, achievable in this world through the intelligent pursuit of genuine goods, is the Epicurean starting point. It is not virtue for its own sake. It is not conformity to divine command. It is the natural goal that nature itself has indicated through the feelings it has provided to every living creature.

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**12. Pleasure Is the Guide, Beginning, And End Of The Happy Life. Pleasure Includes Not Just Bodily Stimulation But All Mental And Physical Experience We Find To Be Agreeable.**

Jefferson's Syllabus specifies: *"Pleasure active and in-dolent. In-dolence is the absence of pain, the true felicity. Active, consists in agreeable motion; it is not happiness, but the means to produce it. Thus the absence of hunger is an article of felicity; eating the means to produce it."*[30]

And in the letter to William Short, Jefferson quoted and endorsed one of Epicurus's own practical maxims on the subject: *"One of his canons, you know, was that 'that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided.'"*[31] This is not the pleasure of a crude hedonist. This is the pleasure of a calculator — an honest account of what actually produces the greatest genuine good over the course of a life.

Jefferson applied this calculation explicitly to the question of friendship in the Head and Heart letter to Maria Cosway (1786), where the "Head" argues that acquaintances should be avoided because their loss produces pain, and the "Heart" responds that the pleasures of friendship and love are genuine goods that outweigh the pain of eventual loss: *"Grief, with such a comfort, is almost a luxury!"* The Heart's position is the Epicurean one — genuine pleasures are to be pursued even when they involve risks of future pain, because the honest calculation favors them.

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**13. The Term "Pleasure" Is The Exact Equivalent Of "Absence of Pain." All Experiences Of Life Are Either Pleasurable Or Painful, With No Middle Ground.**

Jefferson's Syllabus makes the two-feelings doctrine explicit: *"The summum bonum is to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind... In-dolence of body, tranquility of mind."*[32] And: *"In-dolence is the absence of pain, the true felicity."*[33]

In the Adams letter of 1820, Jefferson stated the underlying principle in philosophical terms: *"I feel: therefore I exist."*[34] Feeling — the fundamental faculty of experiencing pleasure and pain — is the bedrock of existence and of knowledge. Everything is referred back to this faculty because it is the natural standard that connects us to what is genuinely good and genuinely harmful.

The two-feelings doctrine — that pleasure and pain are the only real evaluative categories and that every experience is one or the other — appears in Jefferson's consistent refusal to recognize any third category. The Stoic "indifferents," the Platonic abstraction of virtue as something above and beyond pleasure and pain, the Christian elevation of suffering as spiritually valuable — all of these introduce a third category that Epicurus denied. Jefferson's materialism and his consistent grounding of evaluation in what is felt as good or harmful leaves no room for the third category.

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**14. Virtue Is Not Absolute Or An End In Itself. There Is Nothing Good But Pleasure And Nothing Evil But Pain.**

Jefferson's Syllabus: *"Virtue the foundation of happiness. Utility the test of virtue."*[35]

These two statements together are the complete Epicurean account of virtue. Virtue is not good in itself, as an abstraction with value independent of its consequences. Virtue is good because it is the foundation of happiness — because the exercise of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice produces more genuine pleasure than pain over the course of a life. And utility — what actually pro-

duces genuine good — is the test. Abstract virtue that fails this test has no claim on us.

Jefferson demonstrated this principle in practice throughout his letters. In the Carr letter: *"Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you."*[36] Virtue is commended not by divine command or by its intrinsic nature but by what it actually produces — comfort, pleasantness, the love of others. The test is utility.

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**15. Life Is Desirable, But Unlimited Time Contains No Greater Pleasure Than Limited Time. A Full Life Cannot Be More Than Full.**

Jefferson's Syllabus includes: *"Man is a free agent. Virtue consists in: 1. Prudence 2. Temperance 3. Fortitude 4. Justice."*[37] And the letter to Adams in 1820 closes: *"I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence."*[38]

Jefferson applied the principle that a full life cannot be made fuller by more time most movingly in his letter to John Adams in 1816: *"There is a ripeness of time for death, regarding others as well as ourselves, when it is reasonable we should drop off, and make room for another growth. When we have lived our generation out, we should not wish to encroach on another."*[39]

And in the letter to Short, writing at the age of 76 near the end of his life: *"With one foot in the grave, these are now idle projects for me. My business is to beguile the wearisomeness of declining life, as I endeavor to do, by the delights of classical reading and of mathematical truths, and by the consolations of a sound philosophy, equally indifferent to hope and fear."*[40]

Equally indifferent to hope and fear. Not hoping for more life, not fearing the end of it. The cup that has been full does not need to be fuller. This is the Epicurean attitude toward time and death — not resignation, but the recognition that a life well-lived, filled with genuine pleasures, is complete in itself regardless of its duration.

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## What Jefferson Demonstrates

The history of Epicurean philosophy has been so thoroughly controlled by its enemies — calumnied by Stoics, buried in Platonic theology, domesticated by Humanists who stripped it of its physics and its courage — that many people encounter it for the first time as a minor footnote to the traditions that suppressed it. The assumption has been allowed to settle that this was the inevitable outcome: that Epicurus's philosophy was necessarily going to be absorbed, distorted, and forgotten.

Jefferson demonstrates that the assumption is false.

Here was a man who read the primary sources in their original languages, understood the philosophy correctly, named it explicitly in private correspondence he knew could damage him politically, and applied it consistently across the full range of his intellectual and public life. He fought for the philosophy by name, against Platonism, against Stoicism, against the ecclesiastical Christianity that had absorbed and institutionalized both. He placed its central ethical claim — the pursuit of happiness as a natural right — in the founding document of a new nation. He built the University of Virginia on its epistemological commitment to reason grounded in experience rather than received authority.

He was not perfect in his application of the philosophy, as no human being is. But that is not the point. The point is that someone could understand Epicurus correctly, in the tradition that produced the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and stake a lifetime's intellectual commitment on its truth.

The philosophy was not fated to be domesticated. It was not necessary that the most honest and empirically grounded philosophical tradition in the ancient world should have been replaced by the Platonic-Christian synthesis that suppressed it. Thomas Jefferson is the proof.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Part Two: Physics

# The Continuing Vitality of Epicurean Physics

## Introduction: A Story About the Sun That Is Really About Everything

In a recent scholarly essay, T.H.M. Gellar-Goad takes up one of the most ridiculed positions in the history of ancient philosophy: the Epicurean claim that the sun is the size it appears to be. Cicero mocked it. Stoic philosophers used it as evidence that Epicureans were intellectually unserious. Modern critics have repeated the mockery with updated vocabulary. And on the surface, the laughter seems justified – after all, we know that the sun is enormous, roughly a million times the volume of the earth, and it looks to the naked eye like a disk about the size of the full moon. Surely anyone who says the sun is "the size it appears to be" is either joking or confused.

But Gellar-Goad's analysis shows that the critics, ancient and modern, have consistently misread what Epicurus was actually doing. When Epicurus says the sun is "as big as it appears," he is not asserting that the sun is the size of a dinner plate or, as Cicero mockingly claimed, "perhaps a foot in diameter."[1] He is making a precise epistemological point: that our knowledge of the sun's true size is bounded by our perceptual access to it, that in the ancient world – before the age of advanced telescopes and space travel – no more advantageous vantage point was available from which to measure it, and that the honest philosophical position given those limitations was to remain in a state of reasoned uncertainty while trusting what the senses actually deliver rather than substituting mathematical speculation for sensory evidence.

The result, as Gellar-Goad shows, is that the Epicureans turned out to be less wrong than everyone who laughed at them. Every ancient astronomer who provided a specific measurement of the sun was wrong – dramatically, confidently, and precisely wrong. The Epicureans, by refusing to commit to a precise measurement they could not verify, avoided being concretely wrong. This was not timidity or evasion. It was good epistemology.

And this insight – that Epicurus was doing good epistemology rather than bad astronomy – is the key that unlocks the broader significance of Epicurean physics for us today. The purpose of this article is to develop that key and apply it to the four core propositions of Epicurean physics that remain most philosophically significant. We will argue that each of these propositions functions as a set of logical guardrails against specific kinds of error that have repeatedly distorted human understanding – and that modern science, far from superseding the Epicurean framework, has in crucial respects confirmed it.

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## Part One: What Kind of Enterprise Is Epicurean Physics?

### Not a Textbook to Be Superseded

The first thing to understand about Epicurean physics is what it is not. It is not a science textbook. It is not an attempt to track the most recent developments in Hellenistic astronomy or meteorology or biology. Epicurus was fully aware that specific questions about the natural world – the exact size of the sun, the cause of lightning, the mechanism of earthquakes – were subjects on which multiple explanations might be consistent with the evidence and none might be definitively provable with the means available. For such questions, he explicitly endorsed the method of offering multiple possible explanations rather than committing dogmatically to one. We would like to know the truth in every case, but where the evidence cannot decide, every explanation must still fit the facts, and none may bring the gods back in: "Only superstition must be excluded" (DL X.104).[2] So long as we have at least one explanation that fits the facts and leaves no room for the supernatural, we need not go on adding to the list forever.

What Epicurean physics *is* is a search for the truth about the nature of things. Epicurus did not start from a wish to be free of fear, or even from a settled belief that pleasure is the goal, and then build a physics to suit it. He came to philosophy, Apollodorus reports, because his teachers "were not able to explain to him the passage about Chaos in Hesiod" (DL X.2).[3] He would not accept that the world was made out of Chaos, and he went looking for the truth. He urged "the constant occupation in the investigation of nature" (DL X.37), and he insisted that "we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena" (X.87).[4] If that evidence had led him to a creator who issues commands and rewards and punishes men according to them, he would have been among the first to follow it. It led instead to atoms and void.

The truth comes first, and only then do we decide how to live in light of it. We trust the senses, and so we trust nature, and nature tells every living thing to follow pleasure (*On Ends* I.30).[5] But we cannot follow that guide well unless we know how nature works, so we study nature to perfect our pursuit of pleasure through the truth. False beliefs about the universe produce the fears that poison human life – fear of divine punishment, fear of death, fear of cosmic fate – and only the truth can remove them. A comforting myth will not do: "There is no way to dispel the fear about matters of supreme importance, for someone who does not know what the nature of the universe is but retains some of the fears based on mythology. Hence without natural philosophy there is no way of securing the purity of our pleasures" (Principal Doctrine 12).[6] This is why Cicero's Epicurean could call Epicurus both "the great explorer of the truth" and "the master-builder of human happiness" (*On Ends* I.32).[7] The two goals are not in conflict. Each supports the other.

This means that Epicurean physics operates primarily at the level of *necessary propositions* – claims about what must be true, given what we observe, rather than claims about the specific mechanisms by which particular phenomena work. Specific mechanisms are uncertain and Epicurus says so openly. The necessary propositions are another matter. These are not provisional empirical hypotheses to be replaced when better instruments are developed. They are logical arguments from features of experience so universal that no future discovery could undermine them without undermining the experience itself.

The philosopher A.A. Long, in his landmark 1977 article "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism," identifies exactly this dual character of Epicurean physics: it operates both at the level of foundational logical argument (about what the universe must consist of and how it must work) and at the level of specific explanatory hypothesis (about how particular phenomena occur).[8] The foundational arguments are meant to be definitive. The specific hypotheses are tentative and revisable.

The article that follows addresses only the foundational level. We are not arguing that Epicurus was right about the size of the sun, the distance of the moon, or the mechanism of thunder. We are arguing that the five core propositions of his foundational physics – about the principle of conservation, the nature of matter, the extent of space, the eternity of the universe, and the exhaustiveness of the matter-void framework – remain philosophically sound, and that the history of science has not refuted them but rather, in important respects, confirmed them.

## The Canonical Foundation

Any discussion of Epicurean physics must begin with a reminder of the epistemological foundation on which it rests – the Canonics that we have analyzed in detail in the companion article on that subject. Epicurus established three and only three reliable criteria of truth: sensation, preconception, and feeling. These criteria are not arbitrary; they are the sources of all genuine knowledge, and any argument that leads to a conclusion contradicting what they plainly show must be suspected to contain a flaw.

This epistemological principle has a specific application to physics. When an argument in physics leads to a conclusion that contradicts universal human experience – that matter is nothing, that the universe came from nothing, that everything is necessarily determined, that nothing can be known – the Epicurean response is not to accept the conclusion as a sound discovery but to search for the error in the argument. As Epicurus stated directly in his Letter to Herodotus: we must "stick to our sensations" as the means of determining what needs confirmation and what is established.[9]

This is the posture that generated both the Epicurean position on the sun and the four propositions we examine below. In each case, Epicurus is not claiming

to have solved a specific empirical question that physics is still working on. He is establishing what any coherent account of the world must include, on pain of contradicting what observation and reason together plainly establish.

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## Part Two: Nothing Comes From Nothing – and Nothing Goes to Nothing

### The Most Fundamental Principle in Epicurean Physics

Before examining any of the specific propositions about atoms, infinite space, or the eternity of the universe, there is one principle that underlies all of them and without which none of them can be properly understood. It is the first principle Epicurus states in the Letter to Herodotus, and Lucretius places it at the very opening of *De Rerum Natura* as the foundation on which the entire system rests:

> *"Nothing is ever begotten of nothing by divine will."* – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book I[10]

> *"Nothing comes into being out of what is not. For in that case everything would come into being out of everything, with no need for seeds. Also, if that which disappears were destroyed into what is not, all things would have perished, for lack of that into which they dissolved."* – Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 38–39[11]

The principle has two inseparable halves. First: nothing comes from nothing. Second: nothing passes away into nothing. Together they constitute what Epicurus calls the principle of conservation – the assertion that the total quantity of what exists neither increases nor decreases. Matter is neither created nor destroyed; it is only rearranged.

### Why This Principle Is Logical, Not Empirical

It would be a mistake to read these as empirical claims of the kind that future scientific discoveries might revise. They are logical claims – arguments about what is possible, not merely what has so far been observed.

The argument for "nothing comes from nothing" proceeds as follows: if things could arise from nothing at all – from the complete absence of any prior condition – then there would be no reason why they should arise from this precondition rather than that one, at this time rather than that one, in this place rather than that one. Anything could arise anywhere at any time from nothing. But we observe that nature is not like that. Particular outcomes arise from particular prior conditions, reliably and consistently. Wheat grows from wheat seed, not from any random condition. Fire requires fuel and oxygen, not any arbitrary circumstance. The very orderliness of nature – the fact that it is governed by regularities we can observe and learn – is itself evidence that events have prior causes and that those causes have genuine causal power. If anything could arise from nothing, the orderliness we observe would itself have no explanation.

The argument for "nothing passes into nothing" is equally direct: if things could genuinely cease to exist – not merely change form, not merely disperse into smaller constituents, but become absolutely nothing – then over any sufficiently long time, everything would eventually disappear. Since things exist now, they have not disappeared into nothing. The matter of the universe persists.

### The Guardrail This Provides

The practical significance of this principle in Epicurean philosophy is immense. It does two things simultaneously.

First, it eliminates supernatural creation from any coherent account of nature. If nothing can come from nothing, then the universe cannot have been created from nothing by a divine act. Either the divine creator existed within a prior universe (which then also needs explanation), or the universe has always existed and needed no creator. Both conclusions point toward the same result: the universe as a whole is eternal, and the attempt to explain its existence by positing a creator who created it from nothing is not an explanation at all – it is a restatement of the mystery with an additional entity added.

Second, it establishes the basis for natural science as such. If effects have prior material causes, and those causes have prior causes, then the world is in principle intelligible: we can trace the causes of phenomena back through chains of prior conditions, and we can understand what produces what. This is what science ac-

tually does. Without the principle that things come from prior things – that nothing arises from nothing – there would be no basis for the scientific investigation of causes, because any apparent cause might be irrelevant and the actual "cause" might be nothing at all.

**Modern Science and Conservation**

The modern scientific equivalents of Epicurus' principle are the conservation laws that physics has established as the bedrock of the discipline: conservation of energy, conservation of mass-energy, conservation of momentum, conservation of charge. These laws state, in precise mathematical form, exactly what Epicurus stated in philosophical form: the total quantity of certain fundamental properties of physical systems does not change. It is rearranged, transferred, transformed – but not created from nothing or annihilated into nothing.

The physicist may observe that energy can be converted into mass (as in nuclear reactions) and mass into energy (as demonstrated by Einstein's famous equation). This is not a violation of the Epicurean principle; it is a more precise statement of what "conservation" means. The total quantity of mass-energy is conserved even as the forms in which it exists change. What cannot happen – what modern physics agrees cannot happen – is the spontaneous appearance of energy or matter from a state of absolutely zero energy, absolutely zero everything. The quantum vacuum, which is sometimes described as "nothing," is in fact something: it is a physical field with specific properties, a specific energy density, and it is governed by specific laws. It is emphatically not the Epicurean nothing – the absolute non-being from which Epicurus says nothing can arise.

This alignment between Epicurean first principles and the conservation laws of modern physics is not a coincidence. It reflects the fact that both Epicurus and modern physics are responding to the same underlying logical structure of the question: what must be true of any coherent account of a world in which events have causes and nature behaves with regularity?

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## Part Three: Matter Is Not Infinitely Divisible

### The Argument from Experience

Epicurus' argument for the existence of atomic minima – for the proposition that matter is not infinitely divisible – begins not with a laboratory result but with a logical analysis of what infinite divisibility would mean. The key passage is from the Letter to Herodotus (56–59):[12]

> "Moreover, we must not suppose that in finite bodies there are infinitely many parts, however small. We must not only do away with division into smaller and smaller parts to infinity, so that we do not make all things weak, and in our conceiving of aggregates be forced to grind down things that exist and let them go off into the non-existent – but also we must not suppose in finite bodies there is to be an infinite traversal even of the smaller parts."[13]

The argument has two related strands. First: if any finite body were infinitely divisible, then dividing it completely would produce infinitely many parts – and an infinite sum of even the smallest finite quantities would be infinite, not finite. But we observe that finite bodies are finite in size. Therefore, the process of division must stop somewhere. There must be a smallest unit – not the smallest we have yet found with current instruments, but the smallest that *can* exist, such that dividing further would yield nothing at all.

Second: if you can always divide further, then "traversing" any finite body in thought requires traversing an infinite number of steps. But an infinite process has no end, and therefore you would never reach the other side of even the smallest pebble. The observable fact that finite distances can be traversed – that we can walk across a room, that light can travel from the sun to the earth – establishes that there must be a minimum unit of extension.

### Epicurus' Distinctive Contribution: Minima Within Atoms

David Sedley, in his authoritative analysis of Epicurean physics, has shown that Epicurus made a significant advance beyond Democritus at precisely this point. Where Democritus held simply that atoms are physically indivisible, Epicurus

developed the more precise concept of *minima* – theoretical minimums of extension that are the smallest units of which atoms themselves are composed.

Atoms, for Epicurus, are the smallest *physical* units – the smallest units of matter that actually move independently through the void. But each atom contains a finite number of *theoretical* minima, the smallest conceivable units of extension. These minima are not themselves independent particles; they cannot be isolated from the atom of which they are parts. But their existence follows necessarily from the argument against infinite divisibility, and their number within any atom is finite.

As Sedley explains, Epicurus answered the Aristotelian objection that the concept of "smallest magnitude" is self-contradictory: how can something have size but no parts? The answer is the analogy to perceptual minima – the smallest visible unit, the unit that is just barely detectable by the human eye at the limit of its resolving power. That visible unit has no detectable parts smaller than itself, and yet it is a genuine unit of size, not a geometric point. The theoretical minimum is analogous: a unit of extension with no further parts, but with genuine spatial magnitude.

## The Modern Confirmation

The modern scientific history of atomism is the history of finding successively smaller components of matter – from the Daltonian atom, to the nucleus and electrons, to protons and neutrons, to quarks and leptons. Each layer of discovery seemed, at first, to threaten the atomist framework by showing that the previously supposed "atom" was in fact composite. But in each case, the discovery confirmed the structure of the argument: there *are* minimal units, and the task of physics is to find them.

Victor Stenger, physicist and author of *God and the Atom* (2013), traces this entire history and concludes that the Standard Model of particle physics represents the current best understanding of what those minimal units are. Quarks, leptons, and the bosons of the Standard Model appear to be genuinely elementary – that is, not composed of further sub-units detectable by any current or foreseeable experimental method. We do not know with certainty that these are the ultimate minima. Physics may discover further structure. But the logical ar-

gument that there *must* be some level at which division stops has been repeatedly vindicated as each successive "atom" turned out to be divisible – until we reach the level where present theory and experiment can find no further structure.

Stenger makes the case that, in the final analysis, atoms and the void are all that exists, and that the Standard Model represents, at our current level of investigation, the vindication of the Epicurean framework rather than its refutation. The framework predicted that there must be ultimate constituents of matter. Physics has been finding them, progressively, for two centuries.

There is a specific parallel to Epicurus' theory of minima in the concept of the Planck length – approximately $1.616 \times 10^{-35}$ meters – below which the current frameworks of physics cannot meaningfully apply. Whether the Planck length represents a genuine minimum unit of space, an ultimate minimum of physical extension below which nothing can meaningfully exist, is a question current physics cannot definitively answer. But the existence of such a theoretical limit – the recognition that there is a scale below which the concepts of current physics break down – is entirely consistent with, and arguably supportive of, the Epicurean logical argument that division cannot proceed to infinity.

## What Epicurus Was Actually Claiming

It is important to be precise about what the Epicurean claim is and is not. Epicurus was not claiming that the specific particles known to fourth-century-BC Greeks are the ultimate constituents of matter. He was claiming that *some* level of ultimate constitution must exist, for logical reasons that no future empirical discovery can undermine. The logical argument is: if matter were infinitely divisible, finite bodies would be either infinite in size or would dissolve into nothing. Neither is observed. Therefore, division stops somewhere. That conclusion is not refuted by discovering that what we once thought was the stopping point turns out to be further divisible. Every such discovery simply relocates the stopping point. The logical argument remains intact.

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## Part Four: The Universe Has No Boundary in Space

### The Argument for Infinite Extent

Epicurus' argument for the infinite extent of the universe is stated in the Letter to Herodotus (41–42):[14]

> "The universe is boundless. For that which is bounded has an extreme point: and the extreme point is seen against something else. So that as it has no extreme point, it has no limit; and as it has no limit, it must be boundless and not bounded."[15]

This is an argument from the concept of a boundary itself. A boundary is a point at which something ends and something else – at minimum, empty space – begins. But that means a bounded universe would have an "outside" – something beyond its edge. If there is something beyond the edge of the universe, then the universe includes that something, and what we called the edge was not really the edge. And if there is nothing beyond the edge – not even empty space – then the boundary is the point at which the very concept of extension ceases to apply. But that is not a boundary in any ordinary sense; it is an incoherence.

The argument is purely logical. It does not depend on empirical measurements of the universe's extent. It depends on the analysis of what "boundary" means when applied to the totality of what exists. Any coherent conception of the universe must either be infinite in extent, or it must explain what lies beyond the boundary – and that explanation will inevitably expand the universe to include whatever that something is.

### Epicurus Versus the Bounded-Universe Traditions

The major alternative traditions, ancient and modern, have consistently posited a bounded universe. In Aristotle's cosmology, the universe is bounded by the outermost sphere, beyond which there is no space at all – not even empty space. In certain interpretations of modern cosmology influenced by the Big Bang model, the universe is described as "finite but unbounded" – the analogy being to the surface of a sphere, which is finite in extent but has no edge. In religious

cosmology, the universe has a beginning in time (and often an implied boundary in space) created by divine act.

Epicurus' argument applies with equal force to all of these positions. If there is no space beyond Aristotle's outermost sphere, then the outermost sphere has no "outside" – but that means it has no boundary in the ordinary sense, because a boundary is defined by what it is a boundary *between*. The Aristotelian "bounded universe" is either incoherent (there is literally nothing beyond the edge, not even absence of things) or it is secretly infinite (what lies beyond the outermost sphere is the void, which is exactly what Epicurus says). In neither case does Aristotle's bounded universe escape the Epicurean argument.

The modern cosmological models that describe the universe as "finite but unbounded" are more sophisticated, but they face a related difficulty: they apply differential geometry to describe the large-scale structure of space, and that geometry has an answer to the question "what is beyond the observable universe" – namely, more universe, whether or not that universe is currently accessible to observation. The observable universe is bounded by the limits of our observation, not by the limits of what exists. Epicurus would note the distinction.

### Matter and Void Both Infinite

Epicurus further argued that not only space but also the quantity of matter in the universe must be infinite. The argument is simple: if the quantity of matter in the universe were finite, it would have edges – regions beyond which there is no matter but only void. On an infinite scale of time, the finite matter would disperse into the infinite void and never form stable combinations. Since we observe stable combinations (including ourselves), the amount of matter must be sufficient to produce and maintain them – which requires an infinite supply to counterbalance the infinite dispersal of void.

This argument, unlike the pure logical argument about the extent of space, is an empirical argument from the stability of the world we observe. It depends on the assumption that the world as we find it is sufficiently stable and persistent to require explanation – an assumption that seems undeniable.

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## Part Five: The Universe Has No Beginning and No End in Time

### The Argument from Conservation

The proposition that the universe as a whole has no beginning and will have no end is perhaps Epicurus' most direct confrontation with religious cosmology, ancient and modern. Its basis is the principle that nothing can come from nothing and nothing can pass away into nothing – the twin conservation principles that Epicurus states at the very beginning of the Letter to Herodotus and that Lucretius develops at length in Book I of *De Rerum Natura*.

> "Nothing comes into being out of what is not. For in that case everything would come into being out of everything, with no need for seeds... Also, if that which disappears were destroyed into what is not, all things would have perished, for lack of that into which they dissolved. Moreover, the totality of things was always such as it is now, and always will be the same." – Letter to Herodotus 38–39[16]

The argument is that creation from nothing – in the strict sense of literally nothing, not even void or vacuum fluctuations – is logically impossible. If things could arise from nothing at all, they would arise randomly, from any precondition, at any place and time. But we observe that nature is orderly: particular types of seeds produce particular types of plants, not random types; particular combinations of materials produce particular compounds, not arbitrary results. Order and regularity require prior causes. Prior causes require that something already exists. Therefore, at no point in the history of the universe was there literally nothing.

Similarly, if things could pass away into literal nothing – not into their constituent parts, but into non-existence – then over infinite time everything would eventually disappear. Since things exist now, they have not passed away into nothing. Therefore, the total quantity of what exists has been conserved throughout all past time and will continue to be conserved through all future time.

## Against the Theological "Moment of Creation"

The theological alternative – that the universe was created by a divine act from nothing at some point in the past – is one of the oldest human ideas and one of the most resistant to philosophical examination. Epicurus examined it and found it incoherent on multiple grounds.

First, the logical problem: if the divine being existed before the universe, then the divine being existed in a universe that contained at least one entity – the divine being itself. That universe is not "nothing." The creation story, if taken literally, requires that the creator existed in a context prior to creation, which means that context is itself part of what needs to be explained.

Second, the physical problem: what was the creator doing before creation? If the creator is perfectly happy and self-sufficient (as the Epicurean gods are), then no purpose or motive for creation is available. If the creator was moved by some purpose, then the creator had needs and was not perfectly self-sufficient. The Epicurean gods, precisely because they are genuinely blessed and undisturbed, have no reason to create anything and no reason to be troubled by the existence of a universe that runs itself by natural law.

Third, the empirical problem: the evidence of the world as we observe it – full of inefficiency, waste, catastrophe, and organisms that consume each other – does not suggest deliberate benevolent design. Lucretius makes this argument at length and with characteristic force in Book V of *De Rerum Natura*.

## The Modern Context: Big Bang and Beyond

The most direct modern challenge to the Epicurean proposition about the temporal infinitude of the universe comes from Big Bang cosmology. The standard model of cosmology describes the observable universe as having originated approximately 13.8 billion years ago from an extremely hot, dense state – a "beginning" that seems to contradict Epicurus directly.

Several responses are in order.

First, the "beginning" of the Big Bang is the beginning of the *observable universe*, not necessarily of all that exists. Current cosmological models cannot describe what preceded the initial singularity (or whether "preceded" even makes sense in that context) because the physics breaks down. This is not evidence that there

was nothing before the Big Bang; it is evidence that we do not yet have the physics to describe what was there.

Second, many serious cosmologists – Fred Hoyle, who proposed the steady-state model; Roger Penrose, with his conformal cyclic cosmology; cosmologists working on eternal inflation and the multiverse – have questioned whether the Big Bang represents an absolute beginning or a phase transition within a larger, eternal cosmos. Victor Stenger was explicit on this point: the concept of the atom persisted for centuries, despite often running afoul of conventional thinking, and similarly the concept of an eternal universe need not be abandoned simply because the observable universe has a describable history. Stenger himself argued in *God and the Multiverse* (2014) that evidence and logic both favor the eternal existence of the total cosmos, of which our observable universe is one region or phase.

Third – and this is the crucial point for understanding Epicurus – the conservation principles he invokes are not cosmological assertions about what happened 13.8 billion years ago. They are logical claims about what is possible: that creation from absolute nothing is not possible, and that destruction into absolute nothing is not possible. These claims are not contradicted by Big Bang cosmology, which does not describe the universe as arising from *nothing* (in the strict logical sense of absolute non-being) but from an initial state whose nature is not yet fully understood.

The physicist Lawrence Krauss has written extensively about how quantum mechanics allows "something from nothing" – but what he means by "nothing" is the quantum vacuum, which has specific properties, contains energy, and is governed by physical laws. That is not the Epicurean "nothing." The Epicurean argument is specifically about absolute non-being – the complete absence of everything, including space, time, laws, and vacuum. Nothing in modern physics posits creation from *that* kind of nothing, and nothing in modern physics could do so coherently.

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## Part Six: Everything That Exists Is Either Matter or Void

### The Framework and Its Scope

Epicurus states the framework plainly in the Letter to Herodotus (39–40):[17]

> "The totality of things is bodies and void... Of bodies, some are composite, and some are those of which composites are formed... The universe consists of bodies and space: for that bodies exist is universally witnessed by sensation itself... And if there were not that which we name void and room and intangible substance, bodies would not have anywhere to be or to move through in the way in which they are seen to move."[18]

The division of all that exists into *body* (matter) and *void* (empty space) is not a primitive empirical guess about physics. It is a logical exhaustion of what it means for something to exist spatially. Either something occupies space – and then it is body, a material entity – or it is the absence of material occupancy – and then it is void, the place where body is not. The dichotomy is exhaustive by definition. There is no third option that is neither one nor the other.

Epicurus makes this explicit when he says that "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."[19] This is the most philosophically confident statement in his entire physics – more confident than any specific claim about atoms or the sun – and it is confident precisely because it is based on analysis of what existence means, not on empirical hypothesis.

### What "Matter" Means: Expanding the Category

The history of physics since Epicurus has enormously expanded our understanding of what counts as "body" – as the material content of the universe. Newton's mechanics dealt with massive particles and forces acting between them. Maxwell's electrodynamics introduced fields. Einstein's relativity showed that energy and mass are interchangeable and that spacetime itself has properties. Quantum mechanics introduced wave-particle duality and the uncertainty principle.

Quantum field theory describes particles as excitations of underlying fields that permeate all of space.

Each of these developments has been taken by some commentators to threaten the Epicurean framework – how can "atoms and void" describe a universe of fields, waves, curved spacetime, and quantum superpositions? But this concern rests on a misunderstanding of what the framework claims.

The framework claims only that everything that exists either has material effects – it can act on other things, be acted upon, produce observable consequences – or it is the spatial absence of such material things. It does not specify the *form* that material existence takes. Whether matter takes the form of classical particles, quantum fields, curved spacetime geometry, or some more fundamental structure not yet discovered, if it has effects on the observable world, it falls under the category of "body" in the Epicurean sense. If it has no effects on the observable world, it is not a part of this universe and the Epicurean framework is not responsible for accounting for it.

This is precisely the point Stenger makes when he describes the quantum field: far from demonstrating the existence of a holistic universe in which everything is intimately connected to everything else, relativity and quantum mechanics (and the standard model that was built upon their foundation) confirmed that the universe is reducible to discrete, separated parts. No continuous aether exists throughout the universe. Fields are not a new substance beyond matter and void; they are a description of how matter interacts across the void that separates it.

## Why "Nothing Else Is Even Conceivable"

The power of Epicurus' claim that nothing outside matter and void is even conceivable is its applicability to every proposed third substance. Consider the candidates:

**"Energy"** – Is energy a third substance beyond matter? No. Energy is a property of material systems – a measure of their capacity to do work, to produce changes in other material systems. It is not a substance that exists independently of the material systems that have it. When we say "energy is conserved," we mean that the capacity for material systems to affect each other is conserved through transformations. This is entirely consistent with the matter-void framework.

**"Fields"** – Are quantum or classical fields a third substance? No. A field is a mathematical structure that assigns properties to points in space – but those properties are manifested as the behavior of material particles. The electromagnetic field is the description of how charged particles interact; the Higgs field is the description of how particles acquire mass. What the Large Hadron Collider detects are particles – the material quanta of these fields. The field is a theoretical tool for describing material interactions, not a third substance.

**"Consciousness"** or **"mind"** – Is consciousness a third substance beyond matter? This is the oldest and most persistent challenge to the matter-void framework. Epicurus addressed it directly by treating the soul as a material entity – a cluster of fine, mobile atoms – that disperses at death. Modern neuroscience has not resolved the hard problem of consciousness, but it has established overwhelming evidence that consciousness is causally dependent on physical brain states, which is consistent with, if not demonstrative of, the Epicurean position. The challenge of consciousness to the matter-void framework remains a live philosophical issue, but it is not resolved by positing a third substance; it is resolved either by showing how material processes give rise to conscious experience (the project of modern consciousness science) or by accepting some form of Epicurean anti-reductionism in which conscious experience is a genuine emergent property of material systems, real at its own level without requiring a non-material substrate.

**"Dark matter" and "dark energy"** – These are perhaps the most interesting cases from the standpoint of modern physics. Dark matter and dark energy have been inferred from their gravitational effects but have not been directly detected. Does their existence challenge the matter-void framework? On the contrary: their *gravitational effects* – the fact that they produce observable consequences in the behavior of matter we can detect – places them squarely within the "body" category of the Epicurean framework. Whatever dark matter and dark energy turn out to be, they are things that interact with the material world in ways we can, at least indirectly, observe. They are unknown forms of matter, not unknown substances beyond matter.

### The Guardrail Function

Epicurus' framework of matter and void functions as a guardrail against a specific and persistent form of philosophical error: the positing of entities that exist but have no material effects, no connection to observable reality, and no way of being verified or falsified. Plato's Forms, Aristotle's Prime Mover, Descartes' res cogitans, Kant's thing-in-itself, and various forms of supernaturalism all fall into this category. They posit entities that are not body (they have no spatial location and no physical effects of the normal kind) and not void (they are supposed to be something, not mere absence). They are, in Epicurean terms, conceivable only by confusion – by importing into the concept of "existing outside the material world" a positive content that it cannot coherently have.

The guardrail does not prevent physics from discovering new forms of matter or new ways in which matter behaves. It prevents philosophy from manufacturing pseudo-entities that have no connection to material reality and then elevating them to the status of fundamental explanations.

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## Part Seven: Natural Law, the Swerve, and the Rejection of Both Fate and Chaos

### The Problem That Long Addresses

A.A. Long's 1977 article "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism" addresses what has seemed to many commentators a tension at the heart of Epicurean physics: if atoms move according to fixed natural laws (weight, shape, size), how is there room for the swerve – the spontaneous, uncaused deviation that Epicurus introduces to break determinism?[20] And if the swerve introduces genuine randomness into atomic motion, how can the orderly regularities of nature be explained?

Long's resolution is subtle and important. He argues that Epicurus distinguishes sharply between what might be called *nomological necessity* – the regularities that govern how atoms of particular shapes and sizes interact – and *total determinism* – the claim that every event is the inevitable consequence of prior atomic config-

urations with no room for genuine indeterminacy. Epicurus accepts the former and rejects the latter.

The regularities of nature – that fire is hot, that seeds produce plants of the same species, that the movements of the heavens follow patterns – are grounded in the stable properties of atoms. This is what makes nature law-governed rather than chaotic. But the specific trajectory of any individual atom, at the sub-microscopic level, is not completely determined by its prior history. The swerve introduces an element of genuine indeterminacy that propagates upward through the system, making possible genuine freedom of choice for beings complex enough to exercise it.

This is a philosophically careful position, and Long shows it is the correct reading of the evidence. When Epicurus says atoms move "according to their own nature," he means that their typical behavior reflects stable properties – but "typical" does not mean "without exception."[21] The exception – the swerve – is real and introduces the genuine agency that determinism would eliminate.

### The Parallel with Quantum Mechanics

The parallel between the Epicurean swerve and quantum indeterminacy has been noted by many scholars and is more than superficial. Quantum mechanics establishes that, at the level of individual particle events, there is genuine irreducible indeterminacy – not merely a gap in our knowledge, but a feature of reality itself. The decay of a radioactive nucleus, the path of an individual photon through a double slit, the spin of an electron – these are genuinely indeterminate in the sense that no prior information, however complete, would allow us to predict them with certainty. Only probabilities can be given.

This quantum indeterminacy is precisely what Stenger describes when he writes that with the rise of quantum mechanics and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in the early twentieth century, the "true" randomness inherent in the motion of all bodies became built into the structure of physics. Physicists had (almost) no trouble giving up the determinism of the Newtonian world machine.

The Epicureans had done this over two thousand years earlier. And importantly, they did it not by abandoning natural law but by insisting that natural law and genuine indeterminacy are compatible – indeed, that any adequate account of

the natural world must include both. Epicurus' system maintains the reliability of natural processes (atoms of particular shapes consistently behave in particular ways) while refusing to accept that this reliability extends to complete mechanistic determination of every event.

This combination – natural regularity without complete determinism – is what modern quantum field theory also achieves. It is one of the most striking confirmations of the Epicurean framework by modern physics.

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## Part Eight: The Sun Revisited – On the Virtue of Honest Uncertainty

### What Gellar-Goad Establishes

We return to Gellar-Goad's analysis of the sun's size to draw out its full philosophical significance. His central finding is that Epicurus' position on the sun's size was a position of principled, honest uncertainty – grounded in a clear-eyed recognition of the limits of what the available evidence could actually support. Epicurus was not saying the sun is small; he was saying that the data available to us, processed through the proper Epicurean methods, does not allow us to say with confidence how large the sun really is. The sun appears a certain size to our senses; our senses are reliable reporters of what they perceive; but the inference from the sun's apparent size to its actual size requires a perspective adjustment that, before the development of advanced telescopes and spacecraft capable of direct solar measurement, ancient observers simply had no means to perform. There was, as Epicurus observed, no vantage point more suitable for measurement than the one all earthly observers shared.

Every ancient mathematician who provided a confident figure for the sun's size was wrong. The Epicureans, by refusing to commit, were less wrong. But more importantly, the Epicureans were doing the right thing epistemologically – they were respecting the limits of what the evidence actually supports, rather than substituting the prestige of mathematical calculation for genuine observational grounding.

As Gellar-Goad shows through his close analysis of the Lucretian passage on the sun's size, the text is saturated with hedging language – subordinate clauses, conditional statements, qualifications – precisely to underscore the conditioned and tentative character of any claim about a celestial body whose distance and size we cannot independently verify. The style enacts the epistemology.

### The Shibboleth Argument

Gellar-Goad further argues that the Epicurean position on the sun functioned as a "shibboleth" – a marker that distinguished those who understood Epicurean epistemology from those who did not. The correct response to the sun question was not to provide a number but to recognize that providing a confident number with no observational grounding was itself the error. The philosopher who understood this had understood something important about the Epicurean theory of knowledge. The philosopher who mocked the Epicureans for failing to provide a number had missed the point entirely.

This is the structure that should govern our reading of Epicurean physics generally. The Epicurean "position" on any specific question of natural science is not necessarily a claim about the specific mechanism or specific measurement. It is a position about the *epistemological status* of that question – about what kind of claim can be made with confidence, what kind requires multiple hypotheses, and what kind cannot be resolved with available means. The four propositions we have examined in this article are in the first category: claims that can be made with logical confidence because they are grounded in analysis of what experience and reason together require, rather than in specific measurements that future instruments might revise.

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## Part Nine: Against the New Mystics – When Science Overreaches

### The Misuse of Quantum Mechanics

Since the development of quantum mechanics in the early twentieth century, there has been a persistent tendency to use its seemingly paradoxical results as evidence for conclusions that would have struck Epicurus as exactly the kind of

philosophical overreach he was most concerned to prevent. The idea that quantum mechanics shows consciousness causes collapse of the wave function, that everything is connected to everything else through quantum entanglement, that the observer and the observed are ultimately the same thing, that quantum uncertainty means anything is possible – these claims are simultaneously popular and, in the judgment of most physicists, wrong as interpretations of what the physics actually says.

Stenger devoted significant portions of his career to combating precisely these misreadings. Stenger sets the record straight: the quantum field, like all fields and everything else, is made up of particles and void. Fields are made up of points, each with its own value. They are not etheric or liquid or of some substance other than material particles interacting across void.

The Epicurean response to the misuse of quantum mechanics follows directly from the Canon. When an interpretation of physics leads to conclusions that contradict what our senses plainly show – that individual objects exist in definite locations, that effects have causes, that there is a distinction between the observer and the observed world – the Canon instructs us to suspect the interpretation, not to abandon the senses. The claim that quantum mechanics proves the observer and observed are the same thing is not established by quantum mechanics; it is a philosophical interpretation of quantum mechanics that contradicts what observation consistently shows and that serves primarily to resuscitate, in scientific language, the kind of idealist metaphysics that Epicurus had already refuted.

### The Misuse of Big Bang Cosmology

Similarly, the use of Big Bang cosmology to argue for divine creation from nothing – "see, even scientists now admit the universe had a beginning!" – is a philosophical overreach that Epicurus would have identified immediately. The Big Bang describes the early history of the observable universe; it does not describe absolute creation from nothing, and it does not establish that nothing existed before the initial singularity. The singularity itself is a mathematical artifact indicating where the current theory breaks down, not a description of a boundary between something and nothing.

As we noted above, even within mainstream cosmology there are serious theoretical reasons – eternal inflation, cyclic models, string landscape theories – to think that the observable universe is not the whole of what exists, and that "what came before the Big Bang" is a question with an answer, even if we do not yet know what that answer is. The Epicurean principle – the universe as a whole had no beginning and will have no end – is not refuted by Big Bang cosmology. It simply cannot be verified or falsified by the subset of reality that Big Bang cosmology describes.

### The Misuse of Complexity and Emergence

A third area of philosophical overreach is the use of complexity and emergence – the undeniable fact that complex systems have properties not predictable from the properties of their parts – to argue for something beyond the material world. If consciousness, or life, or meaning cannot be "reduced to" physics and chemistry, the argument goes, then there must be something more than matter.

Epicurus anticipated this argument in his anti-reductionism, which Sedley has analyzed in detail. The Epicurean response is not to deny that complex systems have genuine properties that are not apparent at the atomic level. On the contrary: Epicurus insists that phenomenal properties – colors, pleasures, mental states – are genuinely real at the phenomenal level and cannot be dismissed as "mere appearances" without also dismissing the evidence on which all knowledge rests. But genuine emergence does not require a non-material substrate. The emergence of new properties at higher levels of organization is compatible with a material universe in which those properties are causally produced by, though not identical with, the material substrate. The mist that rises from a river is not itself water – but it is produced by water, it consists of water, and its existence is fully consistent with a universe of matter and void.



## Part Ten: The Guardrails Are Not a Cage

### What the Framework Permits

It would be a serious misreading of Epicurean physics to conclude that its framework of necessary propositions is meant to constrain scientific inquiry. Epicurus

was entirely open to the discovery of new phenomena and new mechanisms. He explicitly endorsed the method of multiple explanations for phenomena whose specific mechanism was uncertain – a method that is, in essence, the hypothetico-deductive method of modern science in its most cautious form.

What the framework constrains is not inquiry but *philosophical overreach*: the use of specific empirical results to establish conclusions that go beyond what the evidence actually supports, particularly when those conclusions involve positing entities or processes that contradict universal human experience. The guardrails mark the boundaries of what any coherent account of nature must include (the conservation principle, matter, void, natural regularity, no infinite divisibility, no spatial boundary) and what any honest account of nature must avoid claiming (creation from nothing, total mechanistic determinism, entities beyond matter and void, claims about unmeasurable quantities stated as measurements).

Within those boundaries, everything is open. And the history of physics has been, in large part, the systematic exploration of what those boundaries contain – an exploration that has found them to be both more complex and more wonderful than Epicurus could have imagined, but not different in kind from what his framework predicted.

## The Role of Technology as Extended Sensation

One of the most important points for connecting Epicurean canonics to modern science is the status of scientific instruments. Microscopes, telescopes, particle accelerators, gravitational wave detectors – these are extensions of the senses, not replacements for them. They allow us to observe phenomena that are beyond the reach of the naked eye or ear, but the results they produce are ultimately presented as observations: an image, a number on a display, a detection event that is registered and recorded.

The Epicurean criterion of sensation – the reliability of what the senses report – applies to the deliverances of instruments precisely because those deliverances are ultimately sensory: the astronomer looks through the eyepiece, the physicist reads the detector, the chemist measures the spectrum. The chain from the phenomenon to the human observer always ends in a sensory event. This is why Epicurus says that "extensions of the senses that we create" are, in principle, fully

consistent with his epistemological framework. The microscope does not challenge the reliability of sensation; it extends it. The telescope does not invalidate the sun's appearance; it enriches our ability to observe the sun. The particle accelerator does not refute the existence of matter and void; it allows us to probe matter at scales inaccessible to unaided sense.

Whether we call what instruments detect "energy" or "waves" or "fields" or "particles," if the detection is real – if it produces consistent, reproducible results that can be confirmed by multiple observers using multiple methods – then it falls within the "body" category of the Epicurean framework. Whatever produces consistent, reproducible sensory evidence has a material basis, whether or not we yet understand the form that material basis takes.

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## Conclusion: The Sun, the Shibboleth, and the Science That Confirms the Philosophy

We began with Gellar-Goad's analysis of the Epicurean position on the size of the sun – a position laughed at for two thousand years, and which turned out to be less wrong than everyone who laughed at it. The reason it was less wrong is that it was grounded in a clear-eyed recognition of the limits of what the available evidence could establish, combined with a commitment to the logical guardrails that any coherent account of nature must respect.

Those same guardrails – nothing comes from nothing and nothing goes to nothing, matter is not infinitely divisible, the universe has no spatial boundary, the universe has no beginning or end in time, everything that exists is either body or void – have not been overturned by modern physics. They have been, in important respects, confirmed by it. The Standard Model of particle physics is, at the current frontier of our knowledge, an atomist theory. Quantum indeterminacy is, in crucial respects, the modern version of the Epicurean swerve. The best current cosmological thinking treats the universe as eternal in the sense that Epicurus required. And every proposal for entities beyond matter and void – whether divine, ideal, or merely philosophical – continues to founder on the simple Epicurean question: if it exists but has no material effects, what entitles it to the name "existence"?

Epicurus was not attempting to write the final chapter of physics. He was doing what any good philosopher does when confronting a field of inquiry whose specific results are uncertain and contested: identifying the principles that any adequate account must respect, and building the logical guardrails that prevent the specific uncertainties from being exploited for philosophical misdirection. The specific results of physics will continue to develop. The guardrails remain.

The sun is the size it appears to be – or a little larger, or a little smaller. We still cannot say with certainty, even with our modern instruments that have measured it with extraordinary precision, because the question of the sun's "true" size is entangled with questions about the physical definition of the sun's boundary that even twenty-first-century solar physics has not fully resolved. Epicurus did not know the number. Neither, in some sense, do we. But Epicurus understood why he didn't know it, and what kind of honesty that not-knowing required. That understanding – that principled, philosophically grounded epistemic humility combined with confident logical commitment to what must be true – is the continuing gift of Epicurean physics to anyone willing to receive it.

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## Appendix: Lucretius on Magnetism, Le Sage on Gravity, and the Implications of Particle-Stream Theories

### Particle-Stream Explanations: Magnetism, Gravity, and the Ongoing Investigation

The main body of this article has argued that the core propositions of Epicurean physics function as logical guardrails that any coherent account of nature must respect, and that Epicurus explicitly endorsed the method of multiple competing explanations for specific natural phenomena whose mechanism cannot be definitively resolved by available evidence. Both of these principles are illustrated, in an unusually rich and historically extended way, by a single class of explanation that has been proposed and debated across more than two millennia: the explanation of apparent attractions between bodies by streams of particles flowing through the void.

The case involves two apparently distinct phenomena – magnetism and gravity – and a recurring and philosophically serious attempt to explain both within the same materialist framework. That framework traces directly to Lucretius (and therefore likely to Epicurus), was taken up with explicit acknowledgment of that debt by scientists of the Enlightenment, and continues to bear on questions that modern physics has not yet fully resolved. It is a case study in the proper method of holding a serious hypothesis: carefully, without dogmatic commitment, and with a clear-eyed account of what the hypothesis still needs to demonstrate before it can be accepted as confirmed.

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## Lucretius on the Magnet: The Original Particle-Stream Theory

Lucretius devotes a substantial passage in Book VI of *De Rerum Natura* (lines 906–1089 in the standard numbering) to explaining the attraction of iron to a lodestone – the most dramatic example of apparent action at a distance known to the ancient world. What drives iron toward a magnet when nothing visible connects them? The Epicurean answer is characteristically materialist and, in its broad outlines, surprisingly sophisticated.

Lucretius's explanation proceeds through several linked steps. First, the lodestone continuously emits a stream of atomic seeds – a flow of minute particles outward in all directions from the stone:

> *"First, stream there must from off the lode-stone seeds innumerable, a very tide, which smites by blows that air asunder lying betwixt the stone and the iron."*[22]

Second, this outward stream displaces and thins the air between the stone and the iron, creating a region of relative void between them.

Third, because the iron is being struck by air and atomic particles from all directions, this displacement produces an imbalance: the iron is pushed more strongly from the side away from the stone (where the full pressure of the surrounding air still acts) than from the side facing the stone (where the stream from the lodestone has thinned the air and begun to create the void). The iron therefore moves toward the stone – not because the stone "pulls" it by any mysterious action at a distance, but because it is pushed by the greater pressure from behind.

Fourth – Lucretius notes that the atomic structure of iron makes it peculiarly responsive to this mechanism. The pores of iron have an atomic geometry that permits the lodestone's seed-streams to penetrate and disturb the iron's own atomic bonds, setting the iron's constituent atoms in motion toward the stone. The iron moves as a body because its atoms move together:

> *"straightway first-beginnings of the iron start forward and fall into the void, all joined together; it comes to pass that the ring itself follows and advances in this way, with its whole body."*[23]

Lucretius further notes that he has himself observed repulsive effects when a lodestone is placed beneath a brass bowl containing iron filings, which "seethe furiously." He attempts to account for this too: depending on the orientation and the specific pore geometry, the streams from the lodestone can in some configurations push the air against the iron from the near side rather than thinning it, reversing the net pressure and producing repulsion.

Two points deserve emphasis before proceeding. First, Lucretius is doing exactly what Epicurus prescribed for phenomena of uncertain mechanism: he is proposing a plausible material explanation consistent with the foundational principles of the system (atoms, void, no action at a distance, all motion by contact) without claiming certainty about the specific details. He explicitly offers a multiple-explanation framework for associated puzzles – why some materials respond to the magnet and others do not – by noting that different pore geometries will respond differently to the lodestone's streams. Second, the basic intuition – that magnetic effects are produced by something flowing through space between the magnet and the object, and that the geometry of matter at small scales determines which materials respond – is not without genuine merit. The language of "field lines," "flux," and "permeability" in modern electromagnetism echoes, however distantly, the Lucretian vocabulary of streams, seeds, and pores.

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## Le Sage and the "Newtonian Lucretius": Extending the Stream Theory to Gravity

The intellectual distance from Lucretius's theory of magnetism to Georges-Louis Le Sage's eighteenth-century theory of gravitation is shorter than it might appear – and Le Sage himself was fully aware of this. He had been introduced to Lucretius by his father at the age of thirteen, and his reading of *De Rerum Natura* was, by his own account, the primary inspiration for his lifelong project of providing a mechanical, corpuscular explanation for Newtonian gravity. The work in which he offered the most complete and publicly accessible version of his theory he titled, explicitly and deliberately, *Lucrèce Newtonien* – "The Newtonian Lucretius" – published in 1784.

The problem Le Sage set out to solve was one that Newton himself had deliberately left unresolved. Newton's law of universal gravitation described how gravity behaves with extraordinary mathematical precision. It did not explain what gravity *is* – what mechanism causes two bodies separated by empty space to attract each other with a force proportional to their masses and inversely proportional to the square of their distance. Newton famously refused to speculate: "I feign no hypotheses." But the absence of a mechanical explanation left a philosophical vacuum that troubled many of Newton's contemporaries and successors.

Le Sage's proposal was elegant in its basic structure. The universe, he argued, is filled with an isotropic flux of extremely small, extremely fast-moving particles that he called "ultramundane corpuscles" – originating, he supposed, from beyond the observable universe and therefore streaming in from all directions with equal intensity. An isolated body is struck equally from all sides by this flux and experiences no net directional force – it is simply under uniform pressure from all directions. But when a second body is present, each body partially shields the other from the corpuscular flux arriving from the direction of the other. The result is that each body receives slightly fewer impacts from the direction of the other body than from all other directions combined. The imbalance of momentum produces a net push toward the other body – what we observe as gravitational at-

traction is, in this account, the result of diminished bombardment from one direction.

This "push gravity" or "shadow gravity" mechanism reproduces the inverse-square law geometrically: because the shielding effect depends on the solid angle subtended by one body as seen from the other, and because that solid angle decreases in proportion to the square of the distance, the gravitational force naturally falls off as the inverse square. To make mass-proportionality work, Le Sage further proposed that gross matter consists mostly of empty space – cage-like atomic structures so open that the corpuscles pass through almost entirely unimpeded, with only a tiny fraction actually intercepted. The fraction intercepted, and therefore the shielding effect, is then proportional to the number of constituent particles in the body, which is proportional to its mass.

The connection to Lucretius's magnetism theory is unmistakable. Both propose that apparent attraction between bodies is in fact a net push produced by asymmetric particle bombardment. Both require that gross matter be predominantly void – extremely permeable to the operative particles. Both explain why the force is proportional to the amount of matter rather than merely to the surface area by positing that particles penetrate through the full depth of the body. And both are fully materialist: no action at a distance, no occult forces, nothing but particles and void.

Le Sage was not the only, or even the first, thinker to arrive at this picture. The Swiss mathematician Nicolas Fatio de Duillier had proposed essentially the same mechanism in 1690, in an unpublished manuscript of which Newton himself was aware. In a draft scholium for the *Principia* that he never published, Newton wrote that "of this kind there is a unique hypothesis by which gravity can be explained, and the most ingenious geometer Mr. N. Fatio first devised it" (*Huius autem generis Hypothesis est unica per quam gravitas explicari potest, eamque geometra ingeniosissimus D.N. Fatio primus excogitavit*; Hall and Hall, *Unpublished Scientific Papers of Isaac Newton*, p. 313).[24] Fatio even submitted a version of his theory to the Paris Academy in 1731 as a Latin poem explicitly in the style of Lucretius – a gesture that underscores how deeply the Epicurean framework shaped this entire tradition. Gabriel Cramer published a similar theory in 1731, and Le Sage later learned of Fatio's work through Cramer.

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## The Objections Raised: Where the Current Theory Falls Short of Observable Confirmation

The Le Sage tradition attracted serious engagement from some of the greatest scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Leonhard Euler initially praised the model as "infinitely better" than competing proposals. Lord Kelvin (William Thomson) took it up with enthusiasm in the 1860s and 1870s, proposing refinements involving internal energy modes of the corpuscles to address some of its difficulties. James Clerk Maxwell reviewed the theory at length for the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in 1875. Henri Poincaré analyzed it in detail at the turn of the twentieth century. Richard Feynman discussed it in the twentieth century as an instructive example of the enduring challenges of mechanical explanations of gravity. That this constellation of thinkers engaged seriously with the theory rather than dismissing it is itself evidence that the particle-stream approach to gravity is not a naive or philosophically disreputable idea – it is a genuine scientific hypothesis of the first order.

The objections that have been raised against the theory in its current form, however, are substantial and cannot be set aside. They deserve to be understood clearly – not as refutations of the particle-stream idea as such, but as specifications of what any future version of the theory must be able to address before it can be accepted as consistent with what we observe.

The most serious objection is thermodynamic. Maxwell argued that for the inelastic collisions required to produce a net gravitational force – rather than the zero net force that results if collisions are perfectly elastic and reflected particles fully compensate the shielding effect – the energy deposited in ordinary matter by the corpuscle flux would be enormous. By his calculation, the flux required to generate observed gravitational forces would be sufficient to heat ordinary matter to incandescence almost instantaneously. Poincaré later deepened this criticism, arguing that the thermodynamic problem persists across different versions of the theory: any mechanism that produces the required net momentum transfer also produces an energy transfer that, at the scales required, appears to exceed what we observe in the thermal behavior of ordinary matter. This difficulty

presents a conflict between the theory's predicted consequences and what sensation plainly shows about the temperature of the world around us.

A related objection involves the required speeds of the corpuscles. To reduce the drag that the corpuscle flux would otherwise exert on moving bodies – an effect that would cause the orbital motions of planets to decay detectably over time, which we do not currently observe – the corpuscles must move at speeds enormously greater than the velocities of ordinary matter. Calculations within the framework of classical mechanics appear to push this requirement to many orders of magnitude above the speed of light. Under the current constraints of special relativity, no material particle or wave can exceed the speed of light. The theory as currently formulated thus requires either a revision of special relativity or an explanation of how particles moving at superluminal speeds could exist and behave as the theory requires – neither of which has yet been supplied.

A third concern is explanatory: the corpuscles in their current formulation are not independently detectable. Their existence is inferred entirely from the gravitational phenomenon they are supposed to explain, and their other predicted properties – the heating effect, the orbital drag – appear to contradict observation. This does not prove the corpuscles do not exist. But it does mean the theory, in its present form, cannot meet the condition that any legitimate natural-philosophical hypothesis must satisfy: that it be consistent with the full range of what we observe, not merely with the one phenomenon it was specifically designed to explain.

None of this is unusual in the history of science. Dozens of productive theories have required substantial modification – sometimes radical revision of their initial parameters – before they became consistent with the full body of observable evidence. What the objections establish is not that the particle-stream approach to gravity is wrong in principle, but that it is not yet right in its specific formulation. The mechanism is plausible; the quantitative details, as currently specified, generate predictions that contradict observation. That is precisely a situation that calls for further inquiry and modification, not for abandonment of the underlying idea.

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## The Epicurean Verdict: A Hypothesis Worth Considering, but Not Yet Confirmed

The Epicurean evaluation of a situation such as this is not difficult to frame. For phenomena of uncertain mechanism – phenomena that admit of more than one plausible material explanation – Epicurus explicitly endorsed holding multiple candidate explanations simultaneously rather than committing dogmatically to any one of them. The correct posture is neither to embrace the particle-stream theory as established nor to dismiss it as refuted, but to hold it as what it currently is: a plausible, genuinely materialist hypothesis that has not yet been brought into full conformity with all observable facts, and that therefore cannot yet be accepted in its present form.

This is not a verdict of failure. It is exactly the situation Epicurus described when he said that for phenomena whose mechanism we cannot yet resolve with available means, the honest philosophical position is to maintain multiple possible explanations and to continue the investigation. The particle-stream tradition – from Lucretius's account of the magnet to Le Sage's cosmic corpuscles – represents a sustained attempt, over more than two thousand years, to explain some of the most puzzling phenomena in nature by strictly material means, without gods, without occult forces, and without action at a distance. That project is fully consistent with the Epicurean framework, and its continuation is exactly what the framework recommends.

What the framework does require is that any version of the theory that is to be taken seriously must resolve the conflicts with observation that have been identified. A particle-stream account of gravity that generates thermodynamic predictions contradicting observable temperatures cannot be accepted as it stands, any more than Epicurus would have accepted a specific explanation for thunder that required the sky to be made of bronze. The mechanism may well be correct in its broad outlines. However the specific quantitative parameters – the speeds, the masses, the collision properties, the energy budget of the corpuscle flux – must be brought into line with what sensation actually shows before the theory can advance from plausible hypothesis to confirmed explanation.

It is also worth noting that the mechanistic challenge the particle-stream tradition attempted to meet remains genuinely unresolved. General relativity describes how gravity behaves with extraordinary precision; it tells us that gravity is the curvature of spacetime in the presence of mass-energy. But it does not provide a mechanical account of how matter curves spacetime, or what spacetime is made of at the smallest scales, or how gravity is to be reconciled with quantum field theory – the great unfinished project of twenty-first-century physics. The particle-stream tradition addresses a real gap in our understanding, a gap that remains open. Future physics may produce a quantum theory of gravity in which the mediating entity – whether called a graviton, a quantum of spacetime, or something yet unnamed – bears a family resemblance to Le Sage's corpuscles. Or it may not. The Epicurean framework does not require us to predict the outcome; it requires only that we hold the hypothesis honestly, test it against what we can observe, and revise it wherever it conflicts with the evidence.

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**The Deeper Connection: Two Phenomena, One Framework**

What the comparison of Lucretius's magnetism account and Le Sage's gravitational theory ultimately reveals is a single coherent research program pursued across two millennia – the program of explaining the apparent attractions and repulsions of matter by the differential pressure of particle streams flowing through void. Lucretius saw that a lodestone does something: it draws iron without touching it. He proposed that the mechanism must be material, that particles must be involved, and that the geometry of matter at small scales must determine which materials respond and how. Le Sage saw that masses do something: they draw each other across empty space without touching. He proposed the same class of mechanism for the same class of reason.

Both are doing natural philosophy in the Epicurean spirit. Both are insisting that the phenomenon has a material cause. Both are working within the framework of atoms, void, and motion by contact. The fact that Le Sage's specific version of the mechanism encounters thermodynamic and kinematic difficulties that Lucretius's version of the mechanism does not face – because the scale and energy requirements for a cosmic gravitational flux appear vastly greater than those for a magnetic effect between objects one can hold in hand – does not disqualify the

approach. It specifies the problem that the approach must solve in order to succeed.

The Epicurean guardrails do not demand that every plausible material hypothesis be immediately verifiable by available means. They demand that hypotheses remain genuinely answerable to observation – that they generate predictions which could in principle be tested, and that where their current predictions conflict with observation, the conflict be acknowledged honestly and the theory be modified accordingly rather than explained away. By that standard, the particle-stream tradition remains a philosophically legitimate research program. It is not yet confirmed; it is not yet refuted; it is, in the precise Epicurean sense, a serious hypothesis for which the investigation continues.

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→ *Notes for this article*

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# Let All Who Would Free Themselves From the False Claims Of The Geometers Enter Here

## Introduction: Two Inscriptions Over Two Doors

Over the entrance to Plato's Academy in Athens, tradition records an inscription: *"Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here."* The words were more than a subject requirement. They were a philosophical manifesto. The world as it truly is, Plato held, cannot be grasped by those who have trained only on the deliverances of sense experience. The student who can see, touch, and measure the physical world is not yet prepared to understand reality. First he must learn to reason about points without dimension, lines without width, planes without depth – entities that have no counterpart in anything sensation can deliver, but which are, in the Platonic view, more real than anything sensation can reach. Geometry was the training ground for the soul's ascent from the visible world to the intelligible one. To enter without it was to arrive not yet ready to learn what mattered.

As it happens, Epicurus did have an inscription at the entrance to his Garden – or so Seneca reports. In Epistle 21 of the *Epistulae Morales*, Seneca records what he calls the motto carved there: *"Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure."*[1] Scholars note that Seneca may be speaking at least partly metaphorically, but his phrase "the motto carved there" (*ibi insculptum*) suggests he understood this as an actual inscription on the garden gate, and it has been treated as such throughout the history of the school.[2] The Latin text he records – *hospes hic bene manebis hic summum bonum voluptas est* – has the compressed character of something chiseled rather than something spoken.

Whatever the historical truth of the inscription itself, the sentiment it expresses is unimpeachably Epicurean: the announcement, without apology or qualification, that pleasure is the highest good, placed at the very threshold of the school as the first thing a visitor encountered.

That announcement was the Garden's direct challenge to the Academy down the road. Where Plato's inscription demanded submission to abstract geometry as the precondition for philosophical understanding, Epicurus's announced something diametrically opposed: that pleasure – the real, felt, experienced pleasure of a life lived in accordance with nature – was the goal, not the ascent toward eternal mathematical abstractions that could never be touched, tasted, or seen. The Garden's motto was a philosophical statement, not merely a social one.

But the philosophical opposition between the Garden and the Academy ran deeper still, into questions about what kind of things exist and how we can know them. If Epicurus had inscribed a second motto alongside the first – one that announced the epistemological precondition for seeing the world as it actually is, rather than as the geometers claimed – it might have read something like the title of this article: *"Let All Who Would Free Themselves From the False Claims of the Geometers Enter Here."*

That is the subject of this article.

The Epicurean objection to Platonic mathematics was not born of ignorance. Polyaenus of Lampsacus, one of Epicurus's close associates, had been a professional mathematician before joining the Garden, and the Epicurean school continued to engage seriously with mathematical and scientific questions throughout its history. The objection was a principled and systematic one, grounded in the same canonical epistemology that generated the entire Epicurean account of nature: the insistence that any claim about what exists must ultimately be answerable to what sensation and experience establish, and that a framework built on entities definitionally removed from the observable world has made an error at its foundation, whatever the formal beauty of the structure it erects on top of that error.

What makes this ancient dispute more than antiquarian is where it stands today. The confusion that Epicurus identified and resisted – the confusion of a formal model with the reality it models, the elevation of the mathematical description

above the physical thing being described – is not a solved problem. It is, if anything, a larger and more pressing one. In the twenty-first century, professional physicists seriously propose that the universe is literally a mathematical object, that what exists is not matter but equations, that physical reality is identical with mathematical structure rather than merely described by it. String theory requires ten or eleven spatial dimensions, of which only three are perceptible; the remainder are held to be real but geometrically inaccessible to observation. The many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics posits an uncountable infinity of parallel universes, none observable, all required by the formalism. The "mathematical universe hypothesis," advanced by serious researchers, holds that there is nothing more to the physical world than the math – that the equations do not describe the universe, they are the universe.

Epicurus could not have known these specific proposals. He could have predicted their general character. He had identified, with the precision that comes from thinking carefully about foundations, the philosophical move that generates them all: the conviction that when the formal system says something must exist, it must exist, even if no possible observation could establish it or refute it. He had identified the canonical standard that blocks that move: require that your account of what exists be answerable to experience, and be suspicious of any claim about ultimate physical reality that is, by the claim's own logic, unobservable.

This article examines the Epicurean objection in detail – what it was, why Epicurus regarded it as serious, what alternative he proposed, and why the alternative remains more relevant to our own situation than it has been at any point in the intervening centuries.

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## Part One: The Canonical Standard Applied to Mathematics

### What the Canonical Criterion Requires

The epistemological foundation of all Epicurean thought is the doctrine of canonics: the claim that sensation, preconception, and feeling are the three and only three reliable criteria of truth. This foundation is analyzed in detail in the

companion article on Epicurean Canonics and is presupposed here. What matters for the present discussion is the application of the canonical standard to the specific claims of mathematics.

Sensation, for Epicurus, is the fundamental contact between mind and physical reality – the mechanism by which images of things arrive at the perceiving organism and produce genuine knowledge of what exists. The principle that sensation does not err is not a claim that all perceptual judgments are infallible; it is a claim that the deliverances of sensation – what is actually presented to perception – are genuine data about the world, and that any argument which concludes by contradicting what sensation plainly presents must contain a hidden error somewhere in its reasoning. As Epicurus wrote in the *Letter to Herodotus*:

> *"We must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen."*[3]

Apply this standard to the foundational objects of Euclidean geometry. Can you perceive a point? Not a dot marked on a page – that is a physical mark with definite extension. Can you perceive the geometric point the dot represents: an entity of zero dimensions, zero size, zero extension in any direction? No. By its own definition, a geometric point is not something that can present itself to perception, because it occupies no space and therefore cannot emit any image or impression that could travel to a perceiving organism. The same applies to a line of zero width, a plane of zero thickness, and the entire apparatus of classical geometry built on these foundational abstractions.

This is not a superficial objection from someone who has not understood geometry. It is the objection of someone who has understood exactly what geometry is doing and is asking whether what it is doing constitutes knowledge of physical reality or the careful development of a useful model. The Epicurean answer is that it is the latter, and that calling it the former is a specific philosophical error with specific practical consequences that Epicurus took seriously enough to make the subject of sustained analysis.

## The Platonist Answer and Why Epicurus Rejected It

The mathematicians had a ready response to this objection, and the Platonic tradition had provided that response with its most authoritative philosophical housing: mathematical objects are not physical things, and their truth does not depend on being perceivable. The geometric point is not a physical dot; it is an eternal abstract object that the mind grasps by reason. The truths of geometry are truths about these eternal objects, and they are more certain than any truth about the physical world precisely because they are not contaminated by the changeability and imprecision that characterize everything physical. The geometer who proves that the angles of a triangle sum to two right angles has discovered something necessarily and eternally true, independent of any particular triangle drawn on any particular surface. That is supposed to establish the superiority of mathematical knowledge over perceptual knowledge, not merely its difference.

This is a coherent position, and it has been held by serious philosophers from Plato's time to the present. But it is precisely the position that Epicurus's entire philosophy is constructed to deny. The Platonic claim that there is a realm of abstract objects – Forms, mathematical entities, eternal truths – that is more real than the physical world is, from the Epicurean perspective, the foundational error of the Greek philosophical tradition: the invention of a "true world" behind the apparent world, a world that turns out to be the only genuine one while the world of actual experience is demoted to the status of a shadow, an approximation, an imperfect copy of something we cannot directly access.

Epicurus recognized this move for what it was. The "eternal Forms" do not explain the physical world; they duplicate it in an unobservable register and then claim that the unobservable version is the real one. Once you accept that the genuine objects of knowledge are things that cannot be perceived – that the really real is by definition inaccessible to sensation – you have abandoned the only reliable criterion of truth and opened the door to any claim whatever that is dressed in the appropriate logical garments. Plato's Forms, the Stoic *logos*, the theologian's divine creator, the physicist's ten-dimensional manifold: these are variations on the same move. The canonical criterion is designed specifically to block that move at its foundation.

David Sedley, in his analysis of Epicurean anti-reductionism, identifies this as the systematic target of the Epicurean epistemological project. Epicurus is not making an isolated point about one corner of philosophy. He is insisting that the standard for any genuine claim about reality must be answerable to experience, and that any framework that builds its foundations on entities definitionally removed from experience has committed what we might call the constitutive error of bad philosophy. Mathematical Platonism – the claim that geometric points, lines, and planes are real objects of some non-physical kind – is that error applied to mathematics.

## The Specific Objection to Infinite Divisibility

The most technically developed form of the Epicurean objection concerns not just the existence of abstract geometric entities but the principle of infinite divisibility that underlies the classical treatment of continuous quantity.

Greek geometry, and the mathematical analysis of motion and magnitude that derived from it, was built on the assumption that any line segment, any magnitude, any interval of space or time can always be divided further – that there is no smallest unit, no floor beneath which division cannot proceed. This is what makes possible the method of exhaustion, the ancient precursor to integral calculus, by which areas and volumes were calculated to arbitrary precision. It is also what makes Zeno's paradoxes seem threatening: if any distance can always be divided into further sub-distances, how does motion across any interval remain possible?

Epicurus's response was not to offer a mathematical answer within the framework of infinite divisibility. It was to argue that the framework does not match the physical world. In the *Letter to Herodotus*, he introduces what modern scholars have called the doctrine of "minimal parts" (*elachista*):

> *"Besides this we must not suppose that in a limited body there can be infinite parts or parts of every degree of smallness. ... We must notice also that the least thing in sensation is neither exactly like that which admits of progression from one part to another, nor again is it in every respect wholly unlike it, but it has a certain affinity with such bodies, yet cannot be divided into parts. ... And we look at these points in succession starting from the first, not within the limits of the same point nor in contact part with part, but yet by means of their own prop-*

> *er characteristics measuring the size of bodies, more in a greater body and fewer in a smaller."* – Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 56–57[4]

The argument is clear in its structure. If matter were infinitely divisible, you would ultimately reach parts that are themselves nothing – zero-dimensional, zero-extension entities. A composite of nothings is nothing. The world we observe is not nothing. Therefore, matter is not infinitely divisible. Therefore, there must be a minimum unit of extension below which division cannot proceed.

This minimum unit is not the atom, which is the fundamental indivisible unit of matter. It is the minimum part (*elachiston*): the smallest meaningful chunk of spatial extension as such. Atoms in Epicurean physics are themselves extended objects composed of minimum parts. It is these minimum parts that establish the smallest possible structural unit of any extended thing and that constitute the Epicurean answer to the geometer's infinite divisibility.

## A Methodological Note: Guardrails, Not Final Answers

Before proceeding to the detailed analysis of what the minimum part doctrine involves, one point of method deserves to be stated plainly. It connects directly to the approach developed in the companion article on Epicurean physics, and it governs the argument throughout this article as well.

The canonical standard as Epicurus applies it is primarily an *eliminative* tool. Its first function is to identify what cannot be the case – to rule out accounts of physical reality that contradict what sensation and experience establish. A.A. Long, in his analysis of Epicurean natural philosophy, identified this dual character precisely: Epicurus operates at the level of necessary foundational propositions – what must be true and what cannot be true given what we observe – and separately at the level of specific explanatory hypotheses about particular mechanisms, which remain tentative and revisable. The foundational propositions function as guardrails. At the level of specific mechanisms, Epicurus explicitly endorsed holding multiple possible explanations rather than committing dogmatically to one where the evidence does not definitively settle the question.

The practical significance of this distinction is important. This article argues with confidence that the foundational objects of Euclidean geometry – dimensionless points, breadthless lines, infinitely divisible continua – are not physical

constituents of space. That is the guardrail, and it follows from the canonical principle with the same logical directness that "nothing comes from nothing" follows from the principle of conservation: it eliminates a specific class of answers about what reality's ultimate structure can be. What the article does not argue – and what Epicurus himself carefully did not do – is that this eliminative conclusion also settles which specific positive theory of discrete spatial structure is correct. Among all theories that satisfy the canonical standard – that posit granular, physically real structure consistent with what observation establishes – we do not arbitrarily select one. The investigation of competing candidates proceeds rationally, without premature closure, and with all consistent hypotheses held open as legitimate subjects of continued inquiry.

The relevance of this point will become clear when we examine modern physics. The Epicurean framework rules out with confidence that space is infinitely divisible in the Euclidean sense. It does not rule in any single specific discrete theory above its competitors. As the companion physics article showed in the context of Le Sage's gravitational corpuscle theory, the Epicurean verdict on a hypothesis that is consistent with the foundational principles but not yet confirmed in its specific details is not dismissal and not acceptance, but continued serious investigation. That is the posture this article recommends for the several competing discrete-spacetime theories currently under investigation in physics. The guardrails are established. The specific mechanism remains an open question, and it should be treated as one.

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## Part Two: The Doctrine of Minima – Sedley, Furley, and Konstan

### Physical Indivisibility versus Conceptual Divisibility

The scholarly analysis of Epicurean minima has been developed primarily by David Sedley, David Furley, David Konstan, and Gregory Vlastos, and together their work has done more than any other body of modern scholarship to clarify what Epicurus was and was not claiming.

The key distinction Sedley draws is between physical indivisibility and conceptual divisibility. The minimum part is not something that cannot be *thought of* as having two halves – in abstract reasoning, we can distinguish between the left side and the right side of a minimum part. It is something that cannot *exist* in a divided state in the physical world. The distinction is subtle but important: Epicurus is not denying that our minds can perform mathematical operations on arbitrarily small quantities. He is denying that these mental operations correspond to physical processes that could actually occur. The conceptual division of a minimum part is a movement of the mind through an abstract space; it does not describe anything that matter can actually do.

This distinction is what gives the doctrine of minima its epistemological force against abstract mathematics. The geometer says: I can always bisect any line segment; therefore there is no minimum length; therefore space is continuous and infinitely divisible. Epicurus replies: your ability to bisect a line segment in abstract thought does not establish that a physical line segment can always be physically bisected. The operation is one your mind performs on a representation of the world; it is not a report of what the world itself permits. And the world, as the argument for minima establishes, does not permit division without limit.

Furley, in *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists*, traces the ancient debate about indivisible magnitudes back through Aristotle, showing how Epicurus's position represents a deliberate and careful response to Aristotle's analysis of minima in motion. Aristotle had argued that if there are indivisible magnitudes, then the units of space, time, and motion must all be correspondingly indivisible and equal – otherwise contradictions follow in the description of moving bodies. Furley shows that Epicurus accepted this consequence and developed a theory of discontinuous, quantum motion to accommodate it: one unit of motion involves traversing one unit of space in one unit of time, and at any given moment it is correct to say not "the atom is moving" but only "the atom has moved."

Vlastos, in his complementary study of minimal parts specifically, examines how Epicurus's minimum parts function as units of measure (*katametremata*) – not points in the geometric sense (which have no extension) but extended units from which spatial magnitudes are built up by integer multiples, analogously to the way the number system is built from discrete counting units.

## The Contact Problem: Konstan's Extension

Konstan's "Problems in Epicurean Physics" extends the analysis in a direction that is directly relevant to the anti-geometry argument, though Konstan approaches it from the side of atomic physics rather than epistemology. His central question in Section II is: how do atoms maintain distinct identities when in contact with each other?

The problem is this. If the boundaries of atoms are, in the geometric sense, zero-dimensional – if the surface of an atom has no thickness, no extension, no physical reality in its own right – then when two atoms are in contact, there is no physical basis for distinguishing the boundary of one from the boundary of the other. Two adjacent atoms become, at the geometrical limit, indistinguishable from a single merged atom. Void is what separates atoms, and at the point of contact there is no void. A purely geometrical account of atomic surfaces therefore cannot explain how atoms in contact retain their individual identities and can subsequently separate.

Konstan argues that this is precisely why Epicurus endowed minimum parts with *finite extension in all three dimensions*. The minimum part is not a boundary in the geometric sense – a surface of zero thickness – but a physical unit with actual, if tiny, extension. This means that atomic surfaces have physical depth rather than geometric thinness, and that the contact between two atoms is a contact between genuinely extended physical units rather than between mathematical abstractions. The atoms remain distinguishable because their surfaces are themselves physical, not geometric.

This is Konstan's conclusion in his own words: "With the Aristotelian concept of boundary, made physical by endowing it with actual if minimal extension in all dimensions, Epicurus drew the line that divided contiguous substance."[5] The contrast with geometry is explicit. A geometric boundary is zero-dimensional; an Epicurean minimum-part boundary is physically real precisely because it is not zero-dimensional. Without the minimum part doctrine, the atom differs from void only as its geometric complement – and two adjacent atoms cannot be physically distinguished from one. The rejection of the zero-dimensional geometric boundary is not a failure of mathematical sophistication. It is required by the physical theory.

Konstan also clarifies an important distinction between the role of minimum parts and the role of atomic solidity in Epicurean physics. Solidity – the absence of internal void – establishes that matter cannot dissolve into nothing and provides the basis for atomic permanence. The doctrine of minimum parts, by contrast, addresses the discontinuous nature of space, time, and motion, and the problem of atomic contact and boundary. These are two separate lines of reasoning with two separate targets, and Epicurus carefully maintained the distinction between them – a precision that some ancient and modern critics of the theory have missed.

## The Conceptual Distinction and Its Importance

Sedley further argues that Epicurus understood the minimum part not merely as a concession forced on him by the threat of infinite regress, but as a positive doctrine with rich implications for how we should understand the relationship between mathematical description and physical reality.

The minimum part establishes that physical space is *granular* rather than continuous. It has a structure, a finest level of resolution below which the concept of extension does not apply. Mathematical geometry, by assuming that space is infinitely divisible and continuous, is building on a foundation that does not match the actual structure of physical space. It is extraordinarily useful for calculation. It is not a description of what physical space ultimately is.

This is the core of the Epicurean position, and it is stated without hostility to mathematics as a practical discipline. The geometer's results are reliable within the domain where the infinite-divisibility idealization holds – that is, at scales far above the minimum, where large aggregates of minimum parts behave, to excellent approximation, as a smooth continuum. The geometer's results become misleading only when they are taken as descriptions of ultimate physical reality rather than as properties of a useful formal model. It is the ontological claim – the claim that the smooth continuum *is* what space actually *is* at its deepest level – that the Epicurean canonical standard disallows.

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## Part Three: The Ancient Debate – Geometry in the Epicurean Crosshairs

### Polyaenus and the Significance of His Position

The episode of Polyaenus of Lampsacus is the most direct historical evidence we have of Epicurean engagement with professional mathematics. Polyaenus had been a skilled mathematician before coming to Epicurus; after becoming an Epicurean, he declared geometry to be false. Ancient sources – primarily Proclus, the fifth-century Neoplatonist commentator on Euclid – treated this as a cautionary tale about what Epicureanism did to otherwise capable minds.

The dismissal should be set aside. Sedley's analysis in "Epicurus and the Mathematicians of Cyzicus" provides the most sustained modern examination of this episode and shows that the Epicurean challenge to geometry was not a blanket rejection of quantitative reasoning but a targeted objection to the ontological claims that Euclidean geometry implicitly makes. The mathematicians of Cyzicus – a school associated with astronomical and geometrical work in the Hellenistic period – would have understood the Epicurean challenge as precisely what it was: a serious philosophical objection to the status of their discipline's foundational objects. If geometric points and lines are not real things of any kind, then the entire deductive structure of Euclidean geometry, however internally valid, is a system of inferences about nothing. The question of what geometric objects *are* is not peripheral to mathematics. It is the question that determines whether mathematics is knowledge of reality or an elaborate formal game.

When Polyaenus said geometry is "false," he was almost certainly not claiming that the Pythagorean theorem fails when carpenters use it to square a right angle. He was claiming that the theoretical objects about which the Pythagorean theorem is strictly speaking stated – dimensionless points, breadthless lines, angles in the Euclidean sense – do not exist in the physical world, and that a theorem about non-existent objects cannot constitute knowledge of physical reality in the canonical sense. The theorem is valid as internal reasoning within the geometric system. It is false as a claim about the ultimate structure of space.

## Demetrius Lacon and the Later Epicurean Engagement

The Epicurean school did not simply assert its rejection of geometry and move on. Later Epicureans engaged the mathematical tradition in detail. Demetrius Lacon, a philosopher of the second and first centuries BC whose works survive in fragmentary form among the Herculaneum papyri, wrote on geometry, music theory, and rhetoric – disciplines the Epicureans did not dismiss but analyzed from within their own philosophical framework.

The fragments of Demetrius's work on geometry suggest that his approach was to account for what geometry actually does – how it produces reliable practical results – without conceding that it does so because its foundational objects are real. The picture that emerges treats geometry as a highly refined system of idealized approximation: it works because real physical objects approximate the behavior of the ideal objects closely enough for practical purposes, not because the ideal objects are themselves constituents of reality. This is a more considered position than blunt rejection. It permits the Epicurean to acknowledge geometry's enormous practical utility while maintaining that its foundations are models rather than mirrors of physical fact.

## The Pattern the Epicureans Were Identifying

It is worth being precise about what the Epicurean critique was and was not. It was not a claim that mathematics is useless. It was not a claim that geometry's results are practically unreliable. It was not a claim that quantitative reasoning has no place in natural philosophy. Epicurus himself made careful use of mathematical reasoning in developing the doctrine of minima, and the Epicurean tradition continued to engage seriously with quantitative science throughout its history.

The claim was precisely this: that when the formal properties of a mathematical system are taken to describe the ultimate structure of physical reality, something has gone wrong. The mathematical system may be internally consistent and practically powerful. Those properties do not, by themselves, establish that the system's foundational objects exist in the physical world. To make that inference requires independent evidence from sensation and experience – and for the foundational objects of Euclidean geometry, such evidence is not available, because by definition those objects have no properties that sensation could register.

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## Part Four: A Materialist Alternative – What Epicurean Mathematics Would Look Like

### The Arithmetic of Minima

The Epicurean framework does not leave a mathematical vacuum in place of the geometry it critiques. The doctrine of minima provides the basis for an alternative approach to spatial magnitude – one that would look different from Euclidean geometry but would be genuinely mathematical in the sense of providing systematic, quantitative reasoning about spatial relationships.

In this alternative framework, the fundamental unit of spatial measurement is not the abstract geometric point (dimensionless) or any arbitrarily chosen unit length (infinitely divisible), but the minimum part: the smallest actually existing chunk of spatial extension. All spatial quantities are then integer multiples of this minimum. "Length" becomes a count. "Area" becomes a product of counts. Division is not infinitely iterable – you cannot keep dividing until you reach a quantity smaller than the minimum – and the concept of an irrational number, in the full Euclidean sense, requires reinterpretation at the scale of fundamental physics.

The ancient Epicurean writers seem to have been at least partly aware that their doctrine implied this arithmetic structure. The comparison they drew between the minimum part and the unit in arithmetic is suggestive: just as the number system is built on discrete units (you cannot have half of one counting unit without changing the unit), spatial magnitude is built on discrete minimum parts. The continuity that Euclidean geometry assumes is, on this view, a property that large collections of minimum parts appear to have when viewed at scales far above the minimum, just as a beach appears continuous from a distance even though it is composed of discrete grains.

Michael White, in *The Continuous and the Discrete*, examines this Epicurean position with analytical care, tracing the philosophical implications of the minimum part doctrine for the treatment of motion, rest, and spatial continuity. White shows that the Epicurean framework is not merely a negative critique of geometric continuity but an attempt at a positive alternative theory of spatial structure

– one that faces genuine mathematical challenges but also has genuine advantages, above all the avoidance of the paradoxes that attend actual infinity and infinite divisibility.

## The Problem of the Diagonal

The most immediate mathematical difficulty for an Epicurean geometry of discrete minima is the problem of incommensurability – the discovery, associated in ancient tradition with the Pythagorean school, that the diagonal of a square and its side are incommensurable: no unit, however small, can measure both exactly. From the Euclidean perspective, this means that space cannot be merely discrete; there are lengths that fall between any two integer multiples of any unit, no matter how fine.

The Epicurean response to this is not to deny the mathematical result but to reinterpret its significance. If space is genuinely discrete, then the diagonal of a minimum-sized square is not a determinate length in the strict geometric sense. We can approximate it as closely as we like by taking counts of minimum parts in appropriate directions, but we cannot define it as an exact ratio of minimum parts in the way that Euclidean geometry defines it as an exact ratio. The geometrical diagonal, in the Epicurean framework, is another idealization – reliable for practical calculation, not a description of something that physically exists with precise Euclidean properties.

This may seem like a concession. It is worth noting, then, that something very like this concession was eventually forced on physics by the discoveries of the twentieth century. As we shall see, modern physics has established that the concept of a length shorter than the Planck scale is physically meaningless – not merely unmeasurable but devoid of physical content. The incommensurability that seemed to defeat the Epicurean program for discrete geometry turns out, when physics is pushed to its physical limits, to be a mathematical artifact that does not describe anything physically real at the smallest scales.

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## Part Five: Anticipations and Vindications – From Berkeley to the Planck Scale

### Bishop Berkeley and the "Ghosts of Departed Quantities"

The full philosophical elaboration of the Epicurean objection to abstract mathematical entities had to wait almost two thousand years. It came in 1734, when George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, published *The Analyst: A Discourse Addressed to an Infidel Mathematician*. Berkeley's target was Newton's method of fluxions – the differential calculus – and specifically the foundational concept it relied on: the "infinitesimal," an infinitely small but nonzero quantity whose existence Newton needed to define the derivative.

Berkeley's objection was precise. Newton's method required treating the infinitesimal quantity as nonzero at one stage of the calculation (when dividing by it) and as zero at another stage (when discarding it). This is contradictory: the same quantity cannot be both nonzero and zero in the same calculation. The infinitesimal, Berkeley argued, was a mathematical fiction dressed in the language of a limiting process, and the results obtained by operating on it were not strictly proven – they were correct in practice because the errors introduced by treating a nonzero quantity as zero happened to cancel out in the specific applications Newton and his followers considered.

Berkeley's famous phrase for these infinitesimals – "ghosts of departed quantities" – captures exactly the Epicurean canonical objection applied to the mathematical entities of seventeenth-century analysis. An infinitesimal is not something you can perceive. It is not something that corresponds to any physical quantity, since no physical measuring instrument can register a quantity smaller than some finite threshold. It is an entity invented to make a calculation work, given a kind of nominal existence by being named, and then used as though it were a genuine mathematical object. Berkeley was not arguing that the results of the calculus were wrong in practice. He was arguing that they had not been properly demonstrated, because the proof procedures relied on an entity whose status was, in the canonical sense, illegitimate.

This is the Epicurean objection in its most technically precise form. Berkeley was pressing in the domain of seventeenth-century analysis exactly the argument Polyaenus had pressed in the domain of fourth-century BC geometry. The canonical criterion demands that mathematical objects, if they are to constitute genuine knowledge of physical reality, must be answerable to something in experience. Infinitesimals are not. Geometric points are not. Lines of zero width are not. Whatever work these entities do in generating useful results, they cannot be granted the status of genuine constituents of physical reality.

## The Foundations Crisis

Berkeley's critique was taken seriously in ways the Epicurean version had not been, precisely because it targeted the most prestigious scientific achievement of his era – the mathematical engine of Newton's *Principia*, the foundation of classical mechanics. His attack was not effectively answered for more than a century.

When the answer came, it was Augustin-Louis Cauchy and then Karl Weierstrass who provided it, replacing Newton's infinitesimals with the epsilon-delta framework: instead of talking about infinitely small quantities, one talks about "for any positive epsilon, however small, there exists a delta..." This eliminated the ghostly infinitesimal from the formal language of analysis and replaced it with a framework in which all quantities remain finite. Berkeley's technical objection was answered.

But the underlying philosophical question was not. The epsilon-delta framework changed the mathematical language while leaving intact the foundational assumption that the real numbers – the infinitely fine continuum of Euclidean geometry – provide the correct framework for describing physical space and time. Whether real-number mathematics describes physical reality, or whether physical reality is discrete in the way Epicurus's minimum parts imply, was not addressed by making the formal language of analysis more rigorous. That question required physics to answer it, and the answer physics gave in the twentieth century was on Epicurus's side.

## The Planck Length and the Discreteness of Physical Space

Quantum mechanics establishes that physical quantities come in discrete units below which the concept of "a smaller amount" loses physical meaning. Energy

is not infinitely divisible; it comes in quanta. This discreteness is not a feature of measuring instruments but a feature of nature itself.

General relativity establishes that space and time are not a fixed geometrical background but a dynamic physical entity that curves in the presence of mass-energy. Combining these two theories – the project of quantum gravity – leads to the concept of the Planck scale: a set of natural units defined by the gravitational constant, the speed of light, and Planck's constant, that sets the scale at which quantum-gravitational effects become decisive.

The Planck length – approximately $1.616 \times 10^{-35}$ meters – is not merely the smallest length we can currently measure. According to the best current understanding of quantum gravity, it is the smallest length that is physically meaningful. Below the Planck scale, the concept of spatial distance breaks down. Space and time no longer behave as a smooth continuum; quantum fluctuations at that scale are violent enough to make classical spacetime geometry inapplicable. What replaces it is not yet fully understood, but the leading candidate frameworks – loop quantum gravity, spin-foam models, and several approaches in string theory – agree that the structure of spacetime below the Planck scale is discrete rather than continuous.

The Epicurean minimum part is not numerically identical to the Planck length – Epicurus was reasoning from philosophical principles, not from physical measurement, and could not have calculated a specific value. But the conceptual identification is precise. Both are minimum units of spatial extension: not the smallest things we have so far measured, but the smallest things that physical analysis permits to have physical meaning. Both imply that the infinite divisibility assumed by Euclidean geometry is a mathematical idealization that does not match the actual structure of physical space. Both imply that the real-number continuum, while a useful approximation at human-scale distances, is not the correct description of what space fundamentally is.

## Loop Quantum Gravity and the Geometry of Discreteness

The implications of this physical picture for the status of abstract mathematics are precisely what Epicurus would have predicted. In loop quantum gravity, space is built from finite, discrete quanta of spatial volume that cannot be sub-

divided. The smooth Riemannian geometry of general relativity emerges as an approximation when large numbers of these discrete quanta are considered together – just as a smooth beach emerges from a large collection of discrete grains. At the fundamental level, the geometry of space is not a continuous manifold but a combinatorial structure of discrete, countable elements.

The mathematics used to describe this discrete structure is not Euclidean geometry. It is graph theory, combinatorics, and quantum algebra. The Euclidean concepts of point, line, and plane do not appear at the fundamental level of these theories; they appear only at the approximate, emergent level of classical spacetime. Classical Euclidean geometry, for all its mathematical beauty and practical precision, describes an emergent approximation rather than fundamental physical reality. The ancient geometer who insisted that the real structure of space is continuous and infinitely divisible was asserting something that turns out, in light of modern physics, to be an excellent practical approximation and a fundamental misrepresentation. The Epicurean who insisted that space must have a minimum unit was pointing, from philosophical principle and without the benefit of physical measurement, in the direction that physics has eventually moved.

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## Part Six: The Broader Significance – Mathematics as Model, Not Mirror

### The Pattern of Error That Epicurus Was Identifying

What Epicurus was identifying in the mathematical tradition is an instance of a pattern he identified throughout ancient philosophy: the confusion of a useful model with the reality it models. The model is constructed by abstraction – by deliberately ignoring features of real things in order to reason more cleanly about selected relationships. A geometric circle ignores the physical material of which a real wheel is made, ignores its slight imperfections, ignores its extension in depth as well as across a plane. By ignoring all of these, it allows reasoning about shape in general, and that reasoning produces results that can be applied to real wheels with great accuracy.

The error comes when the model is mistaken for reality – when the geometer concludes that because the abstract circle has been so useful, there must be genuine abstract circles somewhere, and that these abstract circles are the *real* circles of which physical wheels are merely imperfect copies. This is the Platonic move, and it is the move that the canonical standard forbids. The abstract circle is not an object; it is a tool of reasoning. It is useful because real wheels are approximately circular. It is not a constituent of reality because nothing in the physical world can actually be the zero-width, zero-depth figure that the abstraction requires.

The same pattern plays out with geometric points. The point is a useful tool: it allows reasoning about location and position without the complication of size and shape. Results derived using points are useful because real objects have positions approximately like the points that represent them. But no object actually has zero size. The point is a model, not a mirror.

This distinction – model versus mirror – is one that modern philosophy of science has taken seriously in ways that ancient philosophy largely did not, and it vindicates the Epicurean position at a general level quite apart from the specific physical question of the Planck length. The instrumentalist tradition in philosophy of science holds that scientific theories are tools for making predictions rather than pictures of ultimate reality. The structural realist tradition holds that science captures the relational structure of reality but not its intrinsic nature. Neither tradition would say, without substantial qualification, that the mathematical models of physics are literal descriptions of what physical things are. The Epicurean position is an ancient precedent for this clearer understanding of the relationship between formal models and physical reality – a precedent that went largely unrecognized for two millennia.

### The Guardrail Epicurus Was Providing

The companion article on Epicurean physics argued that Epicurus's physical doctrines function as guardrails against specific kinds of error that have repeatedly distorted human understanding. The same framing applies here. The canonical criterion applied to mathematical entities is a guardrail against the specific error of confusing formal models with physical reality – the error of taking

the conceptual tools through which we reason about the world for the furniture of the world itself.

This error has practical consequences. When the mathematical formalism of Newtonian physics – built on the infinite real-number continuum and the Euclidean geometry of absolute space – was taken as a literal description of what space is, it set constraints on physical thinking that took two centuries to escape. Space must be continuous; time must flow uniformly; positions must be exactly localizable – because the mathematics said so, and the mathematics was identified with reality. Einstein's general relativity and the quantum revolution required, among other things, a loosening of the grip that classical mathematical formalisms had on physical imagination. Space turned out not to be Euclidean; time turned out not to flow uniformly; position turned out not to be exactly localizable. The mathematics had been an excellent model. It had not been a mirror.

Epicurus's canonical guardrail – insist that your foundational objects be answerable to sensation and experience; be suspicious of any framework built on entities definitionally removed from the observable world – would not have told Hellenistic astronomers the specific values of the Planck length or the equations of quantum mechanics. But it would have preserved, as a standing philosophical commitment, the openness to the discovery that the real structure of space might be something quite different from the smooth Euclidean continuum that the mathematical tradition had placed at the foundation of its account of reality.

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## Part Seven: The Connection to Adulteration, and the Urgency of the Issue Today

### Not Anti-Science but Anti-Overreach

The Epicurean rejection of abstract mathematical Platonism is sometimes misread as anti-scientific or as a symptom of alleged Epicurean hostility to advanced technical learning. This misreading should be firmly put aside. Epicurus was not arguing against mathematical calculation, against quantitative reasoning, or against the use of geometry for practical and scientific purposes. The Epicurean

tradition included mathematicians, engaged with astronomical work, and continued to take quantitative science seriously throughout its history.

What Epicurus was arguing against was a specific philosophical claim: that the abstract objects of mathematical geometry – entities defined precisely by their lack of any physical property that sensation could register – are genuine features of reality rather than useful idealizations. This is not anti-science. It is the application of the canonical standard to the domain of mathematical ontology. And it is a position that a large and growing number of scientists and philosophers of science would, if pressed, find themselves agreeing with: the mathematical formalisms of physics are models, extraordinarily powerful and accurate models, but models nonetheless.

## The Connection to the Three Adulterations

There is a deeper connection between the Epicurean rejection of mathematical Platonism and the broader theme of philosophical adulteration that runs through Epicurean history. The three primary adulterations of Epicurean philosophy – Platonism, Stoicism, and supernatural religion – all share a common structure. Each posits a "true world" behind or above the world of experience: Plato's Forms and mathematical objects, the Stoic *logos* and cosmic reason, the theologian's god and divine providence. Each then argues that the true world is more real, more valuable, and more authoritative than the world we actually inhabit. And from this move each derives the characteristic conclusions that Epicurus identified as sources of unnecessary human suffering: that pleasure is not the standard of good, that death is to be feared, and that our own experience and judgment are not to be trusted.

The Platonic account of mathematical objects is not a peripheral element of this pattern. It is one of its most intellectually seductive expressions. When the geometer tells you that the geometric circle – dimensionless, perfect, eternal – is more real than any physical wheel you can make or measure, and that the physical wheel is valuable only insofar as it approximates the eternal Form, you are being invited to devalue the physical world and the experience of it in favor of an abstract realm that only reason can access. This is the Platonic move in a mathematical key, and it is no less dangerous for being expressed in the politically

neutral language of geometry rather than the obviously theological language of divine creation.

### Why the Issue Is More Urgent Today Than in the Ancient World

When Epicurus established the canonical standard as a guardrail against mathematical overreach, the relevant overreach was the Platonic elevation of geometric abstractions into eternal realities. That was a serious error with serious consequences, and it deserved the systematic philosophical response Epicurus gave it.

The situation today is more extreme. The mathematical abstraction that Epicurus was resisting – a smooth, infinitely divisible geometric continuum – was at least a generalization from something observable. The forms of mathematical overreach that are now widespread in theoretical physics go considerably further. When a physical theory requires entities that are not merely unobserved but unobservable in principle – parallel universes that can never interact with our own, spatial dimensions that are permanently curled beyond any possible detection, mathematical structures that are said to constitute physical reality itself – the departure from the canonical standard is not a matter of degree but of kind. These are not even approximations to something sensory. They are purely formal entities granted physical existence by virtue of appearing in equations.

This is precisely the kind of move that Epicurus was equipping his students to recognize and resist. The question "does this entity actually exist in the physical world, or does it merely exist in my formal system?" is not a question that physics can answer from within its own formal framework. It is a philosophical question, and it requires the kind of epistemological clarity that Epicurus was developing when he established the canonical criterion as the standard for all claims about what exists.

Konstan concludes his analysis of Epicurean atomic mechanics by noting that Epicurus's theory "represents a major achievement in the history of mechanistic world models" and that "it is yet to claim its rightful place in the history of science."[6] That observation, made in 1979 specifically about Epicurean physics, applies with equal force to Epicurus's epistemological framework for evaluating mathematical claims about reality. That framework is not yet fully appreciated.

But its moment of relevance – if it had one to miss – is now, when the inflation of mathematical formalism into metaphysical reality has reached a scale that makes the debates in Plato's Academy look comparatively modest.

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## Conclusion: The Inscription Revisited

We began with two inscriptions over two doors – one actual, one imagined. Plato's Academy announced that you could not enter it without geometry; that the world as it truly is could only be grasped by those who had trained their minds on entities that no sensation could reach. The Epicurean Garden announced, in the terms we have been exploring throughout this article, the exact opposite: that those who allow the properties of mathematical formalisms to override the evidence of sensation have already made the decisive error, and no amount of formal sophistication will correct it from the inside.

The argument between these two inscriptions has not been settled. It is more active today than at any point since it was first posed. The question of whether mathematical elegance is evidence of physical reality – whether the requirement that equations be satisfied constitutes an independent reason for believing that the entities those equations describe actually exist – is not a peripheral question in current physics and philosophy of science. It is the central one, and it is answered very differently by different serious thinkers.

Epicurus answered it clearly, and he answered it on the right side. The canonical standard demands that claims about physical existence be answerable to experience. Mathematical consistency is not experience. Formal elegance is not experience. The requirement that your equations balance is not experience. These are features of models, and a model can be internally consistent and formally beautiful while failing to describe any physical reality at all. History has provided examples in both directions: models that were formally beautiful and physically accurate, and models that were formally beautiful and physically wrong. Beauty and consistency alone do not decide which category a given model falls into.

What decides it, in the end, is the test that Epicurus insisted on from the beginning: bring the claim back to what sensation and experience establish, and be

honest about what that test shows. When a mathematical claim about the ultimate nature of space passes that test – when the discrete, granular structure of spacetime at the Planck scale is confirmed by physical investigation – it counts as knowledge. When a mathematical claim about the ultimate nature of reality fails that test – when it describes entities that are unobservable in principle, that exist only because the formalism requires them, that can be confirmed by no possible experience – it does not count as knowledge, however impressively it is dressed.

It is worth being clear about what this conclusion does and does not require of us, because the point matters for how the Epicurean framework applies to current physics. The canonical standard, as this article has argued from the beginning, functions primarily as a set of guardrails. It tells us with confidence what the ultimate structure of space cannot be: infinitely divisible, composed of dimensionless geometric points, correctly described by a formalism whose foundational objects have no correspondence to anything observable. Those are the things ruled out. They are ruled out because they contradict what sensation and careful physical investigation establish.

What the canonical standard does not do is require us to declare one specific discrete-spacetime theory the winner before the evidence warrants it. Among the competing frameworks that posit granular, physically real spatial structure – loop quantum gravity, causal set theory, spin-foam models, and others – each of which is consistent with what observation currently shows, the Epicurean approach holds all of them as legitimate candidates for continued investigation. We examine them rationally, we test their specific predictions against what can be observed, we eliminate those whose predictions contradict the evidence, and we do not arbitrarily pick from among those that survive. This is precisely the method the companion article on Epicurean physics identified in Epicurus's treatment of gravity, magnetism, and the size of the sun. The refusal to commit to a specific measurement of the sun's size, when no means of verifying such a measurement was available, meant that the Epicureans avoided being concretely wrong while every ancient astronomer who gave a specific figure was dramatically, confidently, and precisely in error. Holding multiple consistent hypotheses honestly and continuing the investigation is not evasion. It is the method Epicurus prescribed for all questions where the canonical standard has established

the guardrails without yet settling which specific mechanism is correct – and the structure of space at its finest scale is exactly such a question.

*Let all who would free themselves from the false claims of the geometers enter here.* Seneca records that Epicurus did have a motto at the Garden gate, announcing that the highest good is pleasure. That inscription was the Garden's declaration of what the philosophical life is actually for – the pursuit of pleasure, not the Platonic ascent toward abstract Forms. The title of this article is the Garden's philosophical companion to that declaration: a statement of what needed to be cleared away before genuine understanding of the physical world could begin. The false claims of the geometers – that the dimensionless point, the breadthless line, and the infinitely divisible continuum are more real than anything sensation can reach – were precisely what needed to be recognized as false before the Epicurean account of nature could be properly understood. Two and a half millennia later, as the inflation of mathematical abstraction into metaphysical reality reaches heights that would have surprised even Plato, both inscriptions deserve their place over the same door – the declaration of pleasure as the goal, and the identification of geometry's false realities as an obstacle to it.

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→ *Notes for this article*

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# Epicurean Response To Idealism

**Berkeley's Subjective Idealism ("esse est percipi")**

Berkeley is the sharpest direct challenge because he attacks the very foundation Epicurus stands on – the reliability of sensation as a guide to external reality. Berkeley argues that material substance is an incoherent concept: all we ever actually have is perception, and "matter existing independently of mind" is something no one has ever experienced or could experience. Therefore minds and ideas are all that exist.

Epicurus's response would be aggressive and direct. Berkeley's argument is self-refuting by the Canon's standards: it uses the evidence of perception to *deny* the external world that makes perception intelligible. For Epicurus, sensation is not a veil between us and reality – it is a *contact* with reality. The eidōla (films of atoms) that strike our sense organs are literally *from* the objects perceived, carrying structural information about them. The causal chain from object to perception is physical and real.

More pointedly, Epicurus would note that Berkeley's "ideas in the mind of God" sustaining reality is simply the Platonic move in different dress – replacing the physical world with a mental/divine substrate that the Canon cannot reach. The argument is that Berkeley has traded one unverifiable metaphysical claim (matter) for another far more extravagant one (universal divine mind).

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**Kant's Transcendental Idealism**

Kant is a harder case, and in many ways the most challenging modern idealist for an Epicurean to face. Kant agrees with Epicurus that knowledge begins with ex-

perience – but then argues that the *structure* of experience is contributed by the mind itself. Space, time, causality – these are not features of things as they are in themselves, but forms imposed by the cognitive apparatus. The "thing in itself" (Ding an sich) is permanently unknowable.

The Epicurean counter operates on multiple levels:

First, Kant's transcendental apparatus – the categories of the understanding, the forms of intuition – is itself a vast intellectual construction that the Canon cannot verify. How do we know the mind imposes these structures rather than receiving them? Kant's answer is essentially rationalist: it is the only way to explain the necessity and universality of scientific knowledge. But Epicurus would reject the premise: the Canon *already explains* how we get reliable knowledge of the world through sensation, prolēpsis, and the accumulation of experience, without needing to posit a cognitive architecture that restructures the world before we perceive it.

Second, the Ding an sich is precisely the kind of entity the Canon cannot reach – a permanently unknowable "real" world behind appearances. Epicurus would say this is a problem Kant created by his own cognitive theory and then declared insoluble. The solution is to drop the theory. The world sensation gives us is not a constructed appearance – it is the world.

Third, Kant's move separates the Epicurean physics-ethics link in a damaging way. If the natural world we experience is partly a cognitive construction, then grounding ethics in natural facts about pleasure, pain, and human flourishing becomes problematic. Epicurus needs the world of sensation to be the real world, not a phenomenal appearance, for his entire philosophical system to hold together.

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**Hegel's Absolute Idealism**

Hegel presents a different challenge entirely. For Hegel, reality is not mental in Berkeley's subjectivist sense, but is the self-unfolding of *Geist* – Absolute Spirit coming to self-consciousness through history and nature. The rational is the real and the real is the rational.

Epicurus would attack this at its foundation. The identification of the rational with the real is precisely the error Epicurus spent his career opposing. For Epicurus, logic and reason are *tools* for organizing what the Canon delivers – they have no independent authority to determine what reality must be like. Hegel's dialectic, developing through contradiction toward Absolute synthesis, is the most extravagant example imaginable of pure rationalist construction claiming metaphysical authority over the world.

The teleological dimension of Hegel – history and nature moving toward a final self-conscious totality – would strike Epicurus as Aristotelian teleology scaled to cosmic proportions and dressed in logical apparatus. The Canon attests to no such directedness in nature. Atomic motion has no goal, history has no telos, and the universe is not moving toward self-knowledge.

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**Contemporary Property Dualism and Phenomenal Consciousness (Chalmers)**

Modern idealism-adjacent arguments often center on consciousness – the "hard problem" of why there is subjective experience at all. David Chalmers argues that physical accounts of the brain cannot explain *qualia* – the felt character of experience – and that this points to consciousness being a fundamental feature of reality not reducible to matter. Some versions of this slide toward panpsychism or idealism.

This is genuinely interesting Epicurean territory because Epicurus *did* grapple with the problem of mind and sensation directly. His answer was a form of what we might call emergent materialism: the soul is composed of especially fine, mobile atoms, and consciousness arises from their specific organization and interaction with the body. There is no explanatory gap because mind is not a different *kind* of thing – it is matter organized in a particular way.

Epicurus would say the hard problem is generated by illicitly treating consciousness as though it must be something fundamentally different from physical processes before the investigation has even begun. That is a conceptual prejudice, not a finding. The Canon gives us sensation as the bedrock fact – and sensation

is itself a physical process, the contact of eidōla and sense organs. There is no additional "inner light" that needs separate ontological grounding.

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**The Common Thread in All Cases**

What is striking is how consistently the same Epicurean moves apply:

Every form of modern idealism, in different ways, interposes *something* between the knower and the world – divine mind, cognitive apparatus, Absolute Spirit, irreducible qualia. In every case Epicurus would say: the Canon does not attest to this interposition, and each of these additions generates more problems than it solves while delivering less than Epicurean materialism already provides cleanly.

The deeper issue is that modern idealism, like its ancient predecessors, typically begins with a *puzzle* (how do we have certain knowledge? what is consciousness? how can contingent things exist?) and then constructs a metaphysical architecture to solve it. Epicurus's method runs in the opposite direction: start with what the Canon delivers and build only as far as the evidence warrants. Any architecture built higher than that foundation is, regardless of its internal elegance, a castle in the air.

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# There Is No True World - Truth And Reality Does Not Require Being Eternally The Same

*An Epicurean account of knowledge, nature, and the ground of reality*

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**An Epicurean Perspective On Reality**

One of the deepest and most consequential divisions in the history of philosophy runs not between optimism and pessimism, or between free will and determinism, but between two fundamentally different answers to a single question: what makes something real?

On one side stands a tradition stretching from Plato through the Stoics, through medieval theology, through Kant, and into much of modern religion and academic philosophy: the view that what is genuinely real must be eternal, unchanging, and accessible not through the senses but through some higher faculty – pure reason, divine revelation, or the intellectual intuition of necessary truths. On this view, the world we actually experience through our senses – the world of growth and decay, of particular things in particular places at particular times, of tastes and textures and feelings – is at best a pale approximation of reality, and at worst a systematic deception. Truth, on this account, requires permanence. What changes cannot be fully trusted. What the senses report is mere appearance.

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On the other side stands Epicurus. His answer to the same question is grounded, concrete, and radical in its implications: what is real is what actually exists and acts in the natural world, and what is true is what the faculties Nature has given us – the senses, the anticipations, and the feelings – reliably report. Truth does not require eternity. Reality does not require unchanging permanence. The world that is born and grows and changes and dies is not a shadow of some higher world. It is the only world there is, and it is entirely sufficient for a life of genuine knowledge and genuine happiness.

## The Platonic Error and Its Stakes

To understand what Epicurus was doing, it is necessary to understand what he was refuting. Plato argued that the objects of genuine knowledge must be eternal and unchanging – what he called the Forms or Ideas. The Form of Beauty is not any particular beautiful thing, which fades and alters and one day ceases to be beautiful. The Form of Justice is not any particular just arrangement, which varies across cities and changes as circumstances change. The Forms are perfect, timeless archetypes of which particular things are merely imperfect, temporary instances. The philosopher's task is to turn away from the unreliable reports of the senses and ascend, through dialectic and pure reason, to intellectual contemplation of these eternal originals.

The implications of this framework are enormously consequential and dangerous. If only the eternal is fully real, then the natural world of change and sensation is demoted. If truth is accessible only through pure reason operating independently of the senses, then the senses are at best unreliable guides and at worst active sources of error. If justice and goodness are eternal Forms rather than practical arrangements serving real human needs, then ethics becomes the attempt to conform to timeless absolutes rather than to reason contextually about the flourishing of actual humans. And if the soul's highest activity is contemplation of the eternal, then the body, with its pleasures and pains and desires, is an *obstacle* to philosophy rather than its natural foundation.

Epicurus recognized this structure and rejected it completely – not as a minority opinion or an alternative interpretation, but as a fundamental error about the nature of reality that made living well impossible. His entire philosophy can be

read as an answer to Plato: a systematic account of what is real, how we know it, and how we live well in light of that knowledge – without any appeal to eternal Forms or supernatural gods, without any higher faculty beyond what Nature has given us, and without any demotion of the sensory world in which we actually live.

## The Three Criteria: Nature's Own Tests for Truth

Epicurus did not merely reject Platonic epistemology. He replaced it with a positive and carefully worked out account of how genuine knowledge is possible. This account rests on what the Epicureans called the Canon – the three criteria of truth that Nature itself provides to every living creature.

**The first criterion is sensation.** Every sense report is true in the sense that it accurately conveys what is happening at the sense organ at the moment of contact. The eye reports light striking it. The hand reports pressure. The tongue reports chemical contact. These reports, taken as reports of what is occurring at the organ itself, never lie – because they involve no act of judgment or interpretation. Error enters only when the mind adds its own contribution: when we leap from "I see something small and round in the distance" to "that is a small round thing," when in fact the object is later found through additional evidence to be large and far away. The sensation was accurate; the inference was hasty. The cure for error is therefore not to distrust the senses but to accumulate more and better sensory evidence, to check reports against each other, and to be careful about what we infer from them.

This is a profound philosophical move. The entire Platonic tradition on which most of Western philosophy is built depends on the premise that the senses are fundamentally unreliable – that they give us only opinion (*doxa*), not knowledge (*episteme*). Epicurus denies this premise directly. Sensation is not the problem; hasty judgment about sensation is the problem. The senses are not a prison from which reason must escape. They are the *foundation* on which all genuine knowledge must be built.

**The second criterion is the anticipations** (*prolepseis* in Greek). An anticipation is a pre-conceptual pattern that the mind builds up through repeated sensory experience. When you have encountered dogs many times, your mind forms a gen-

eral expectation – a recognition template – that allows you to immediately categorize a new animal as a dog before you have consciously analyzed its features. This is not the same as Plato's innate Forms, which are eternal archetypes present in the soul from birth and remembered through philosophical recollection. Epicurean anticipations are built up from actual experience. They are natural, empirically formed, and revisable in light of further experience. They are the mind's practical intelligence working with the materials nature provides, not a window onto a higher world.

The anticipation of "dog" is formed by encounters with actual dogs. The anticipation of "justice" is formed through repeated experience of social arrangements that benefit or harm real people. The Epicurean is therefore not committed to saying that justice is purely arbitrary or merely conventional. The anticipation of justice is real and shared precisely because human beings have the same nature, the same needs, and the same experiences of benefit and harm. But it is not a Platonic Form. It is a natural pattern formed by natural creatures through natural experience – and it is revisable when the facts demand it.

**The third criterion is the feelings of pleasure and pain.** Nature has equipped every living creature with two and only two fundamental feelings: pleasure and pain. These are not merely subjective reactions without cognitive significance. They are evaluative signals that Nature itself has built into living creatures to guide them toward what benefits and away from what harms them. Pleasure signals that something is congenial to our nature. Pain signals that something is working against it. These signals are reliable – not because they always tell us what is good in some abstract metaphysical sense, but because they are Nature's own method of communicating with the creatures she has made.

This is why Epicurus says that pleasure is "the beginning and end of the blessed life" – not as a statement of momentary physical stimulation, but as a philosophical claim about the nature of value.[1] If you want to know what is genuinely good for a human being, ask what genuinely brings more pleasure than pain when all aspects are considered. If you want to know what is genuinely harmful, ask what produces more pain than pleasure. You do not need to consult an eternal Form of the Good, a divine command, or a categorical imperative generated by pure reason. Nature has already given you the measuring instrument. The task is

to use it carefully, taking into account all relevant pleasures and pains, present and future, bodily and mental – and this is precisely what Epicurean practical wisdom (*phronesis*) does.

## What This Means for "Truth" and "Reality"

The implications of the Epicurean Canon for questions of truth and reality are direct and consequential.

Reality, for Epicurus, is not stratified. There is no "true world" behind the world of experience, no higher domain of being that the senses cannot reach and only pure reason can access. The universe consists of matter and void. Matter exists in the form of atoms combining and separating to form the things we experience. Everything that exists – every rock, every animal, every thought, every pleasure, every city – is a product of atomic combination and therefore subject to change, growth, and dissolution. There is no exception to this. Not the soul, not the gods, not justice, not beauty.

This means that *change is not a mark against reality*. A flower is no less real for being temporary. A pleasure is no less genuine for being brief. A just law is no less valid for being revisable when circumstances change. The assumption that what is real must be eternal – that temporariness is a form of inferiority or unreality – is precisely the Platonic error that Epicurus identified and attacked. The world of becoming is not a shadow world. It is *the only world*, and its impermanence is not a defect but simply what the natural world is.

Truth, accordingly, is not a matter of correspondence to eternal Forms but of accurate and well-reasoned contact with the natural world through the faculties Nature has given us. A belief is true when it is confirmed by repeated experience through sensation, consistent with our accumulated anticipations, and when it is not contradicted by other well-established sensory evidence. This confirmation process is the standard for empirical knowledge: not "absolute" certainty in the rationalist sense, not access to a higher realm, but convergent, reliable contact with what actually exists and acts.

This framework also explains why Epicurus insisted that natural science – the study of the physical universe – is the necessary foundation of ethics. If you want to know how to live, you must first know what kind of thing you are and what

kind of world you live in. A being with an immortal soul inhabiting a universe governed by divine providence should live one way. A mortal creature of atoms in an infinite natural universe should live quite differently. You cannot get the ethics right until you get the physics right. And you cannot get the physics right by consulting eternal Forms rather than the world itself.

## An Illustration: Nietzsche Fighting The Same Battle, Two Millennia Later

It is not an accident that Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the 19th century's most powerful critic of the same Platonic tradition Epicurus had attacked, identified Epicurus as a kindred spirit. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche traces what he calls "How the True World Finally Became a Fable" – a six-step history of the error that began with Plato's invention of the "true world" of eternal Forms and culminated in the abolition of that fiction. His language is direct: "The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one."[2] The distinction itself was always false, Nietzsche argues. There is only the world – the world of becoming, of the senses, of life.

This is precisely what Epicurus had argued more than two thousand years earlier: not that the sensory world is "merely apparent" in contrast to a higher reality, but that the distinction between a "true world" and an "apparent world" is itself a philosophical fabrication with no basis in nature. There is only the natural world, known through natural means.

In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche makes the parallel explicit. What he calls the "chandala values" of Platonism and Christianity – the demotion of the body, the denigration of pleasure, the elevation of an imaginary "true world" over the only world that exists – are for him symptoms of a philosophy in the service of life-denial. Against this, he consistently invokes Epicurus as the philosopher who said yes to the world as it actually is. In his private notebooks and in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche returns repeatedly to Epicurus as a philosopher of natural existence – one who found in the actual world of sensation and friendship and intellectual pleasure sufficient ground for genuine happiness, without recourse to any fiction of the eternal.

On the specific question of the senses, Nietzsche is unambiguous. In *Twilight of the Idols* he writes that what the Platonic tradition calls the "testimony of the senses" is falsified not by the senses themselves but by reason adding what the senses do not contain: permanence, substance, thingness. The senses, Nietzsche writes, "do not lie at all. What we make of their testimony, that alone introduces lies."[3] This is almost word-for-word the Epicurean position. The senses report accurately; the error enters in the mind's interpretation. The cure is not to flee the senses but to discipline the reasoning that works with their reports.

Both thinkers agree, further, that the concept of "being" as opposed to "becoming" – the idea that what is truly real must be static and unchanging – is not a discovery but a grammatical and cultural habit projected onto the world. Nietzsche traces it to the structure of language, which forces us to posit subjects behind actions, things behind processes. Epicurus traces it to the false cosmologies that posit eternal divine beings and ideal Forms behind the natural processes physics reveals. The conclusion is the same: the world of becoming – the world that grows and changes and dies – is not deficient reality. It *is* reality.

## The Significance for How We Live

The philosophical stakes of these epistemological questions are not academic. They determine how we live.

If truth requires eternity and reality requires permanence, then genuine knowledge and genuine value are inaccessible to ordinary human beings in ordinary human life. The philosopher must turn away from the senses, suppress the body, ascend through reason or revelation to something beyond the natural world. And from that elevation, everything natural – pleasure, change, the particular joys of particular friendships, the beauty of things that do not last – looks diminished, secondary, suspect.

If, on the other hand, the senses, anticipations, and feelings that Nature has given us are genuine and sufficient tests of what is true and real, then everything changes. Knowledge is possible. Happiness is achievable. The good life is not a philosophical ideal to be approached asymptotically through renunciation of the natural – it is a practical project available to real human beings in the natural

world, pursued through honest reasoning about the pleasures and pains that Nature itself uses to communicate with its creatures.

The flower is real. The friendship is real. The pleasure of understanding something truly, or of sitting with a friend, or of seeing clearly what the universe actually is – these are real. They do not become more real by lasting forever. They do not become less real by being temporary. To be true and real does not require being eternally the same.

This is what Epicurus taught. It is what Nietzsche, arriving by a different road through a very different century, confirmed. And it remains, against the whole weight of the Western philosophical and theological tradition that tried to replace it, the most honest account of what it means to be a natural creature seeking to live well in a natural world.

*For Further Reading:* EpicureanFriends.com and EpicurusToday.com.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Epicurus Against Aristotle On Atomism

*This document has been prepared by ClaudeAI at the direction of Cassius Amicus. It draws on Epicurus's surviving texts (Bailey translations), Aristotle's Physics and De Generatione et Corruptione (Ross and Williams translations), and the modern scholarship of Furley, Konstan, Vlastos, Sedley, and Long and Sedley on the relationship between Aristotelian philosophy of mathematics and Epicurean atomic theory. The first edition of this work was produced on April 27, 2026. Comments are encouraged and revisions are ongoing.*

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## Introduction: A Debt Epicurus Would Not Deny

Ancient philosophical schools were not in the habit of acknowledging their debts to rivals, and Epicurus was less inclined than most to acknowledge debts to anyone. His attitude toward earlier philosophers was famously dismissive – including toward Democritus, the founder of the atomic theory he inherited and transformed. Yet the evidence of Epicurus's own texts – most directly the *Letter to Herodotus* – makes clear that the shape of his atomic theory was determined in significant part by his engagement with a critic neither he nor anyone else could simply dismiss: Aristotle.

The specific doctrine at issue is the Epicurean theory of minimum parts (*elachista*, sometimes rendered *minima* from the Latin of Lucretius). This doctrine cannot be understood in isolation – it was Epicurus's response to a set of philosophical objections that Aristotle had pressed against the original Democritean form of atomism, as David Furley's analysis in *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* established and David Konstan's subsequent work in "Problems in Epi-

curean Physics" extended and refined, with sufficient force to make that original form no longer defensible.

This article reconstructs Aristotle's objections in their main lines, identifies the specific passages in which they are developed, and then traces in detail how Epicurus modified atomic theory to answer each one – showing both where he accepted Aristotle's logic and where he constructed a genuinely original philosophical alternative to the conclusions Aristotle drew from it.

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## Part One: Democritean Atomism and Its Vulnerabilities

### What Democritus Actually Claimed

To understand what Aristotle was objecting to, it is necessary first to be clear about what Democritus had actually proposed. The original Democritean atomic theory, as best we can reconstruct it from the surviving testimonies, held that the fundamental constituents of reality are atoms and void. Atoms are absolutely solid, containing no void in their interior; they are therefore physically indivisible. They differ from one another in shape, size, and arrangement, and all perceptible qualities of composite objects are produced by the configurations and interactions of these atoms in the void.

On the question of the atoms' size and structure, Democritus appears to have held that atoms were themselves partless – that is, that they were genuine indivisibles in the sense that they had no internal structural parts at all. This was the philosophical position that gave atomism its name and its claim to resolve the Eleatic paradoxes: if there are genuine physical indivisibles, then the regress of division cannot proceed without limit, and Zeno's paradoxes about infinite division lose their force. The atom was the floor, below which matter could not be further divided.

It was also, as Aristotle saw clearly, a position that generated its own serious philosophical problems.

### The Confusion Aristotle Identified

A key ambiguity in Democritean atomism, which Aristotle's analysis brought to the surface, concerned the relationship between two things that Democritus appears to have identified: being physically indivisible and being geometrically partless. For Democritus, the atom seemed to be both at once – it was a unit of matter that could not be divided, and it was a unit of matter that had no internal geometric structure, no parts at all, not even in the abstract sense of having a left side and a right side or an interior and an exterior.

Aristotle recognized that this conflation was philosophically dangerous. A body that is physically indivisible need not be geometrically partless. A body can have geometric structure – can have surfaces, edges, corners, an interior and an exterior – without this geometric structure corresponding to physically separable subunits. The distinction between physical divisibility and geometric structure is, in retrospect, obvious. Aristotle's achievement was to press it systematically against the Democritean framework and show that the conflation of the two had produced a theory riddled with internal contradictions.

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## Part Two: Aristotle's Arguments – The Texts and Their Force

Aristotle's most sustained and technically developed critique of atomic indivisibles appears in two main locations: Book VI (called *Zeta* in the older notation) of the *Physics*, and Book I of *De Generatione et Corruptione*. A full reconstruction of his argument requires both.

### The Continuity Argument: Physics Book VI, Opening Passages

The opening paragraphs of Physics Book VI constitute a dense and precise piece of reasoning. Aristotle begins by defining three spatial relationships with precision: things are *continuous* when their extremities are one and the same; they *touch* when their extremities are together (but remain two, not one); they are *consecutive* when nothing of the same kind lies between them. He then argues, on the basis of these definitions, that no continuous magnitude can be composed of partless entities.

The argument runs as follows. If a line were composed of points – indivisible, partless entities – then those points would have to stand in one of the three defined relationships to each other: they would be continuous with each other, or touching each other, or merely consecutive. But:

First, they cannot be *continuous* with each other, because continuity requires that the extremities of two things be one and the same, and a partless entity has no extremity distinct from the entity itself – there is no boundary that could be identified with the boundary of a neighboring entity.

Second, they cannot *touch* each other in the proper sense, because touching requires that two distinct extremities be together, and again, a partless entity has no distinct extremity. As Aristotle puts it: "that which has no parts can have no extremity, the extremity and the thing of which it is the extremity being distinct" (*Physics* VI.1, 231a).[1] A point does not have a boundary; it simply is a location.

Third, they cannot be merely *consecutive* with nothing between them, because between any two points there is always a line, and a line is not a point. Points cannot be arranged consecutively in the way that, say, whole numbers can be arranged consecutively (with no whole number between 3 and 4), because the domain between any two points is not a point-free zone but a continuous segment.

Aristotle's conclusion: "Clearly, then, every continuity is divisible into forever divisibles; for if it were divisible into indivisibles, we should have an indivisible in contact with an indivisible, since the extremities of continuous things are one, and that which is continuous is divided into things whose extremities are in contact." (*Physics* VI.1, 231b15-18)

The force of this argument against Democritus is direct. If Democritean atoms are truly partless indivisibles in the geometric sense, they cannot touch each other, because partless things have no extremities to be "together." They cannot be continuous with each other for the same reason. They can be consecutive – separated by a void – but then the composite bodies formed from them would be nothing more than a collection of isolated particles with no genuine physical continuity between them. The solid, continuous surfaces of ordinary composite objects would be impossible to account for.

## The Motion Argument: Physics Book VI on Indivisible Magnitudes in Motion

Aristotle further develops his analysis by considering what must follow if indivisible magnitudes actually exist. His argument in the middle sections of Physics Book VI establishes that if there are indivisible units of spatial extension, then there must correspondingly be indivisible units of time and of motion – and that this produces a consequence that is either paradoxical or empirically untenable.

The argument proceeds through the observation that if a body traverses an indivisible spatial unit, it must do so in some definite amount of time. If that amount of time is itself divisible, then at some intermediate moment the body would be located at an intermediate point within the spatial unit – but if the spatial unit is indivisible, there is no intermediate point to be located at. Therefore the time in which a body traverses an indivisible spatial unit must itself be indivisible. Similarly for motion: the "moving" across an indivisible spatial unit must itself be an indivisible unit of motion, not a process that has stages.

This has a further consequence, which Aristotle presses: if all motion is composed of indivisible units of motion, each of which involves traversing one indivisible spatial unit in one indivisible temporal unit, then there can be no real differences in the speeds of objects. One object traversing two spatial units in two temporal units and another traversing one spatial unit in one temporal unit are moving at exactly the same speed, in the only sense of "speed" that the framework allows. Apparent differences in speed at the perceptible level must be accounted for in some other way. As Furley sums up Epicurus's answer, he "accepted Aristotle's contention that faster and slower motion entails the divisibility of time and distance; he developed the theory that there are no real differences in speed, and undertook to explain away the apparent differences in the speeds of visible moving bodies" (p. 121).[2] On this theory all atoms move at the same speed, with apparent differences at the perceptible level accounted for by the varying density and configuration of compound bodies rather than by genuine differences in atomic velocity.

## The Contact Problem: De Generatione et Corruptione Book I

In *De Generatione et Corruptione* Book I, Chapter 8, Aristotle develops a related but distinct objection specifically targeting the physical interaction between atoms. His concern here is with the question of what it means for two partless entities to be "in contact." If Democritean atoms are genuinely partless – having no geometric parts, no interior distinct from exterior, no surfaces that are genuinely distinct parts of the atom – then when two atoms come into contact, the contact must be "whole to whole." One whole partless atom touches another whole partless atom.

But "whole to whole" contact, Aristotle argues, is indistinguishable from overlap or merging. If atom A and atom B are each partless wholes, and A touches B "whole to whole," there is no geometrical basis for saying that A ends and B begins. The two atoms, in physical contact, become indistinguishable from a single merged entity. The atomic impenetrability that Democritus required – the principle that no two atoms can occupy the same place – has no physical basis if atoms are partless, because there is nothing in the concept of a partless entity that establishes a definite boundary between it and another partless entity with which it is in contact.

This is the argument that Konstan, in his "Problems in Epicurean Physics," correctly identifies as the most fundamental challenge to Democritean atomism. As Konstan puts it, the problem can be stated as a dilemma: "between the two atoms there is no void. How then can they be separated, if indeed bodies can only be divided by cutting along the space between them, solidity being nothing but the absence of this space?"[3] Two adjacent atoms with no void between them and no geometric internal structure are, by the terms of Democritean physics, indistinguishable from a single larger atom. The theory cannot account for the fact that atoms in contact remain distinct particles that subsequently separate.

## The Zeno Connection: The Arrow and the Moving Rows

Aristotle also invokes the Zenonian paradoxes in a way that bears directly on atomism. The paradox of the arrow – that an arrow in flight cannot change its position in a single instant, and that therefore at any instant it is at rest, and that if it is at rest at every instant it cannot be in motion at all – was one that Democritean atomism was intended to resolve. If there are genuinely indivisible mo-

ments of time, then motion can be understood as a series of discrete jumps from position to position, and Zeno's paradox loses its force.

But Aristotle shows that indivisible temporal moments generate their own version of the difficulty. If at any given moment an atom simply occupies a position – if there is no such thing as "being in the process of moving" within a single indivisible moment – then what distinguishes a moving atom at any given moment from a stationary atom? Konstan frames the problem precisely: "what is it that distinguishes a moving atom at a given moment from a stationary one? If nothing, then why does the moving atom continue to move (or the stationary atom remain at rest)?"[4] The description of an atom at a single moment, if that moment is indivisible, gives no information about whether the atom is moving or at rest. The concept of motion seems to have evaporated entirely.

Aristotle also developed the so-called "Moving Rows" paradox (*Physics* VI.9, 240a4-240b7), which targets the specific case of indivisible bodies moving past each other in opposite directions. If three rows of indivisible bodies move past each other, it is possible to construct scenarios in which an indivisible body passes another indivisible body in half an indivisible unit of time – which the framework should prohibit, since the time unit is supposed to be indivisible. The paradox shows that indivisible magnitudes of space and time, taken together, generate contradictions in the description of relative motion.

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## Part Three: Epicurus's Response – Accepting What Had to Be Accepted, Modifying What Could Be Modified

Epicurus did not simply reject Aristotle's arguments. He accepted the ones he could not refute, drew the conclusions that followed from them, and then constructed a modified atomic theory that incorporated those conclusions while preserving the materialist framework he had inherited from Democritus. The result is a theory significantly different from Democritus's in its internal architecture, even though it retains the same foundational ontology of atoms and void.

## First Move: Separating Physical Indivisibility from Geometric Partlessness

The most fundamental modification Epicurus made was to sever the identification between physical indivisibility and geometric partlessness that Democritus had left implicit and that Aristotle's arguments had shown to be untenable.

For Epicurus, the atom is physically indivisible – it cannot actually be split – but it is not geometrically partless. The atom has an interior and an exterior, surfaces and edges and corners. It has what Epicurus called minimum parts (*elachista*) – genuine structural components distinguishable in reason, even though they cannot exist as independent physical entities and cannot be separated from the atom to which they belong.

This point requires careful statement. Konstan, working from the evidence of Epicurus's own Letter to Herodotus and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, emphasizes the importance of distinguishing the minimum part from the atom itself: "Epicurus decisively separated the two arguments when he lifted from the atom its status as minimum or partless entity, attributing this feature to his (presumably) novel concept of smallest bits (*elachista*, minima) which themselves cannot have an independent existence (hence cannot be atoms)."[5] The atom became, in Epicurus's reformulation, a body of whatever size (though in practice imperceptibly small) composed of minimum parts, and defined by the total absence of any internal void – not by the absence of geometric structure.

Solidity and indivisibility, which Democritus had grounded in the same property (being partless), are now grounded in different properties in the Epicurean system. Solidity – the impossibility of matter dissolving into nothing – is grounded in the absence of internal void in the atom: matter cannot be divided where there is no void to divide along. Indivisibility as the minimum unit of spatial extension is grounded in the properties of the minimum part itself. These are two distinct lines of argument, kept distinct by Epicurus for reasons that are not merely pedantic but structurally required by his response to Aristotle.

**Second Move: The Minimum Part as Unit of Extension**

What exactly is a minimum part, and how does its introduction address Aristotle's arguments? This is where the greatest scholarly debate has concentrated, and where the work of Furley, Vlastos, and Konstan is most valuable.

Vlastos, in his "Minimal Parts in Epicurean Atomism," establishes that the minimum part is not a geometric point but a genuine unit of spatial extension – the smallest possible increment of size. This is what Epicurus means in the *Letter to Herodotus* sections 56-58 when he describes the minimum parts as "measuring the size of bodies, more in a greater body and fewer in a smaller" – the minimum part is the unit in terms of which sizes are measured, analogous to the unit in arithmetic.[6] Just as the number 5 is five counting units and the number 3 is three counting units, a large atom is more minimum parts and a small atom is fewer minimum parts.

The critical property of the minimum part, and the property that addresses Aristotle's continuity argument, is that it has genuine extension in all three dimensions – it has a definite size, however small – but it has no further internal geometric structure. Furley's analysis shows that Aristotle himself, in his discussion of continuity, implicitly requires something like this distinction. Aristotle's argument that a line cannot be composed of points depends on the fact that points are dimensionless – they have no boundary distinct from themselves. If the "indivisible" units from which a line is composed were not dimensionless but instead had some definite, if minimal, extension, Aristotle's argument would not go through in the same form.

Epicurus's minimum parts are extended in this way. They are not points. They have a left side and a right side, a front and a back, that can be distinguished in thought – Epicurus acknowledges this explicitly in sections 58-59 of the *Letter to Herodotus* – but they do not exist as divided things, and they are not composed of further sub-units. The conceptual distinguishability of their sides does not entail physical separability. This addresses Aristotle's first objection: Epicurus is not trying to compose a continuous line out of dimensionless points but out of minimally extended units. The surface of an atom is not a geometric surface of zero thickness but a physically real layer of minimum parts with definite, if minimal, extension.

Furley quotes Epicurus on this directly from *Letter to Herodotus* 58: "We study these parts in succession, beginning from the first, and not all within the same area nor as touching each other part to part, but in their own proper nature measuring out the sizes [of bodies], more of them for a larger one, fewer for a smaller" (p. 115).[7] This passage shows Epicurus engaging directly with Aristotle's language of "touching" and "contact" and proposing that minimum parts stand in a relationship to each other that is neither the "whole-to-whole" contact of Democritean partless entities nor the "part-to-part" contact that Aristotle's framework requires – but something else: they are units of measure whose arrangement constitutes magnitude without requiring that each unit be geometrically bounded in the way Aristotle's framework assumes.

## Third Move: Addressing the Contact Problem

The contact problem – how two atoms in physical contact retain distinct identities – is addressed by the minimum part doctrine in the way Konstan's analysis makes most clear. Because atoms are composed of minimum parts that have genuine extension in all three dimensions, atomic surfaces are not geometric abstractions but physically real outer layers of minimum parts. When atom A and atom B are in contact, the contact is between the outermost minimum parts of each atom, not between the whole of one dimensionless entity and the whole of another.

This means the identity of each atom at the point of contact is established by the physical reality of its surface minimum parts, which are genuine parts of that atom and of no other. The boundary of atom A is determined by the minimum parts that belong to atom A; the boundary of atom B is determined by the minimum parts that belong to atom B. The void that separates atoms is not required to extend between every pair of surface atoms; the physical distinctness of the atomic surfaces, grounded in the minimum part structure, establishes the boundaries without requiring interstitial void at every point of contact.

Konstan states it directly: "With the Aristotelian concept of boundary, made physical by endowing it with actual if minimal extension in all dimensions, Epicurus drew the line that divided contiguous substance."[8] The phrase "made physical" is the critical one. Aristotle himself used the concept of boundary in his analysis of continuity, but for Aristotle the boundary of a physical body is a geo-

metric abstraction – a surface of zero thickness, a mathematical concept rather than a physical entity. Epicurus takes this concept and gives it physical reality by identifying it with the minimum parts that constitute the outer layer of the atom. The boundary becomes a physical thing, not a mathematical abstraction, and in doing so it solves the contact problem that Aristotle had identified.

Konstan further notes, drawing on Diogenes Laertius's *Life of Epicurus* (10.28), that Epicurus apparently wrote two specific works on questions directly related to these contact and boundary issues: *On the Corner in the Atom* (*Peri tês en tôi atomôi gônias*) and *On Contact* (*Peri haphis*). The very existence of these treatises confirms that Epicurus devoted sustained and detailed attention to precisely the problem that Aristotle's analysis had posed, and did not regard it as a minor technical footnote but as a philosophically central question about the foundations of atomic theory.

### Fourth Move: Accepting Quantum Motion

Epicurus's response to Aristotle's arguments about indivisible magnitudes in motion is, in one respect, the most striking of all his responses: he simply accepted the consequence that Aristotle had drawn. If there are indivisible units of spatial extension, then motion must be discontinuous – an atom traverses one unit of space in one unit of time, and there are no intermediate states within that traversal. At any given moment of time, an atom is not *in the process of moving*; it either is at one position or has moved to the next. The correct description of an atom's behavior at any moment is not "it is moving" but "it has moved."

Furley documents this acceptance carefully, showing how Epicurus built Aristotle's conclusions about the relationship between spatial and temporal indivisibles into the structure of his own physics. The principle of uniform atomic velocity – that all atoms move at the same speed – follows directly: if each atom traverses exactly one spatial unit in each temporal unit, and there are no fractions of either, then no atom can move faster or slower than any other at the atomic level. Apparent differences in the speeds of perceptible objects are produced by the interference of collisions in compound bodies, which introduces horizontal components to atomic motion that reduce the net vertical (downward) displacement per unit of time.

Rather than arguing against Aristotle's conclusions about what follows from indivisible magnitudes in motion, Epicurus incorporated those conclusions into his own physics. The quantum, discontinuous character of atomic motion that modern physics would rediscover two and a half millennia later is not an accidental feature of Epicurean atomism; it is a deliberate consequence of taking Aristotle's analysis of indivisible magnitudes seriously.

The remaining problem – what distinguishes a moving atom at a given moment from a stationary one, if at that moment it is simply occupying a position without "being in motion" – Epicurus resolved by the postulate that all atoms are always in motion. There are no stationary atoms. An atom "at rest" at a given moment is a conceptual fiction; the physical reality is that atoms always have moved and will move, and the direction and continuation of an atom's motion is determined by its history of interactions. The atom's "motion" is not a property of a single moment but of a sequence of moments, and the fact that no single moment contains the property "moving" does not prevent the sequence from constituting genuine motion. As Konstan puts it: "It is essential to take into account the previous history of an atom in describing it at any given moment, because only in this way can we know whether and how it is moving with respect to other bodies (or to some absolute point of reference)."[9]

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## Part Four: What Epicurus Did Not Accept – The Limits of Aristotle's Authority

Epicurus's response to Aristotle was not simple capitulation. There were specific elements of Aristotle's analysis that he contested rather than accepted, and identifying these is as important as identifying where he conceded.

### Rejecting Infinite Divisibility

The most fundamental rejection is, of course, the one that the entire doctrine of minimum parts represents: the rejection of Aristotle's conclusion that all continuous magnitudes are infinitely divisible. Aristotle's position in Physics Book VI is that continuity *requires* infinite divisibility – that the concept of a continuum is incoherent unless division can always proceed further. Epicurus denies

this, and his denial is grounded in the positive argument from *Letter to Herodotus* sections 56-57: an infinite number of parts, however small, must sum to an infinite magnitude; since no finite body is infinitely large, no finite body can have an infinite number of parts; therefore division must reach a minimum.

This argument is not a response to Aristotle's formal argument about continuity so much as an independent positive argument for why continuity cannot be infinitely divisible on physical grounds. Epicurus is not trying to beat Aristotle at his own game of formal geometry. He is appealing to the canonical standard: what must be the case, given what sensation establishes about the finite sizes of finite physical bodies? The answer is that infinite divisibility is physically impossible, regardless of what the formal geometry of continuous magnitudes might seem to require. The canonical criterion overrides the geometric argument.

## The Status of Mathematical Boundaries

Furley identifies another point of explicit departure. In *Letter to Herodotus* 58, Epicurus describes the minimum parts as units that are not "touching each other part to part" in the arrangement that constitutes a continuous atom.[10] Furley reads this as Epicurus "clearly envisag[ing] another possibility altogether" (p. 115) for how partless entities can be arranged – one that is neither the "whole to whole" contact that Aristotle diagnosed in Democritean atoms nor the "part to part" contact that Aristotle's own framework requires for genuine continuity.[11] Furley argues that Epicurus was proposing that minimum parts, being genuinely extended units of measure rather than geometric points, stand in a sui generis relationship to each other within the atom that is not captured by Aristotle's trichotomy of continuous/touching/consecutive.

Whether this is a successful philosophical response to Aristotle's arguments about continuity is a question scholars have debated. Konstan is more optimistic than Furley on this point, arguing that the key move – giving the minimum part genuine physical extension in all three dimensions, making it a physical rather than a geometric entity – does enough work to escape the force of Aristotle's formal argument, because Aristotle's argument specifically targets dimensionless points, not extended minima. The debate between Furley and Konstan on this

point represents one of the most technically productive areas of modern Epicurean scholarship.

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## Part Five: The Broader Significance – Epicurus as Careful Philosopher

### What the Episode Reveals About Epicurus's Method

The detailed engagement with Aristotle's criticism that the minimum part doctrine represents reveals something important about Epicurus's philosophical method that is easily obscured by his reputation for dogmatism and his dismissive rhetoric toward predecessor philosophers. Whatever Epicurus said about his intellectual debts, the architecture of his atomic theory shows him taking the objection seriously, identifying precisely which elements of the existing theory the objection successfully defeats, modifying those elements to address the objection, accepting the consequences that follow from the modification even when they are counterintuitive, and constructing a revised theory that preserves the framework's explanatory power while closing the specific vulnerabilities the objection had identified.

The result – a theory of atoms composed of minimum parts, moving discontinuously through a granular space in indivisible units of time – is substantially different from the Democritean theory it replaced. It is also, as the companion article "Let All Who Would Free Themselves From the False Claims of the Geometers Enter Here" argues, significantly more consistent with what modern physics has established about the structure of space and the behavior of matter at its finest scales.

### The Canonical Standard as the Final Arbiter

This was not capitulation to the stronger argument. Epicurus accepted Aristotle's conclusions about quantum motion not because Aristotle's formal arguments were irrefutable on their own terms, but because those conclusions were consistent with – and in some respects required by – the canonical standard that Epicurus held as the final arbiter of all claims about physical reality.

The canonical standard, as developed in the companion article on Epicurean Canonics, requires that claims about the physical world be answerable to the evidence of sensation and experience. When Aristotle's analysis of indivisible magnitudes in motion concluded that there can be no real differences in atomic speeds, this was a conclusion that Epicurus could accept because it was consistent with the physical evidence: we do not observe atoms directly, and the apparent differences in speed that we observe at the perceptible level are explicable through the interference effects of collisions in compound bodies without requiring that individual atoms move at different speeds. The conclusion neither contradicts sensation nor requires any entity that sensation cannot in principle reach.

By contrast, when Aristotle concluded that all continuous magnitudes are infinitely divisible, Epicurus rejected this conclusion – not primarily because Aristotle's formal argument was flawed, but because the conclusion contradicts what the physical evidence requires. Finite physical bodies cannot be composed of an infinite number of parts without becoming infinitely large. That is the canonical check, and it overrides the geometric argument for infinite divisibility.

Use Aristotle's analysis where it is consistent with the evidence, reject it where it contradicts the evidence, and in every case let the canonical criterion – not the formal power of the argument – be the final arbiter of what must be true about the physical world.

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## Key Texts and Passages

**Epicurus:** - *Letter to Herodotus*, sections 56–59 (the primary text for the minimum part doctrine); in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford, 1926) - *Letter to Herodotus*, sections 43–44 (atomic motion and collision) - *Letter to Herodotus*, sections 61 (atomic weight and the direction of motion)

**Aristotle:** - *Physics* Book VI (Zeta), chapters 1–2 (231a–232a): the foundational argument that continuous magnitudes cannot be composed of indivisibles; definition of continuity, contact, and consecutiveness - *Physics* Book VI, chapters 4–5 (234b–236b): arguments about indivisible magnitudes in motion,

establishing the quantization of time and spatial traversal - *Physics* Book VI, chapter 9 (239b–240b): the Moving Rows paradox and its implications for atomic motion - *De Generatione et Corruptione* Book I, chapter 8 (324b–326b): the contact problem; why Democritean partless atoms cannot properly be said to touch each other

**Secondary Scholarship:** - David Furley, *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* (Princeton University Press, 1967); Study I, "Indivisible Magnitudes" – the foundational modern analysis of how Epicurus's motion theory responds to Aristotle's Physics Book VI - David Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," *Isis* 70, No. 3 (1979), pp. 394–418 – especially Section II on atomic contact and the physical role of minimum parts as boundaries; Section I on the nature of atomic collision and discontinuous motion - Gregory Vlastos, "Minimal Parts in Epicurean Atomism," *Isis* 56, No. 2 (1965), pp. 121–147 – the complementary analysis of minimum parts as units of measure - A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1987); section 9 (Epicurean physics: atoms, void, minimal parts) – texts and commentary - David Sedley, "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism," in J. Barnes and M. Mignucci (eds.), *Matter and Metaphysics* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1988), pp. 295–327 - Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (Cornell University Press, 1983) – on Aristotle's treatment of continuity and the ancient debate about indivisible magnitudes - Companion articles: "Let All Who Would Free Themselves From the False Claims of the Geometers Enter Here" and "The Continued Vitality of Epicurean Physics," EpicurusToday.com

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→ *Notes for this article*

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# Greater Than The Sum Of Its Parts: Emergence In Epicurean Philosophy

The title of this article — *greater than the sum of its parts* — is one of the most frequently invoked phrases in popular discussions of complexity, systems, and life. It is usually treated as an inspiring but imprecise way of gesturing at something remarkable: that organized wholes seem to have something the mere collection of their components does not. What the phrase rarely acknowledges is that it describes a precise philosophical position worked out in detail more than two thousand years ago, and that the philosopher who worked it out most thoroughly was Epicurus.

There is a question that has haunted materialist philosophy since the ancient Greeks first proposed that everything is made of small, indivisible particles: if the world is nothing but atoms moving through void, why does it not look like atoms moving through void? Why do we see color, feel warmth, taste sweetness, experience pain, fall in love, compose music, feel the terror of a thunderstorm — when none of these things, so far as we can tell, belong to any individual atom?

This is the problem of emergence: the question of how properties that are entirely absent from the basic constituents of matter can genuinely belong to the compounds those constituents form. It is one of the deepest problems in the philosophy of nature, and it has not gone away. Modern neuroscientists ask how consciousness arises from neurons. Modern chemists ask why water has properties that neither hydrogen nor oxygen possesses. Modern physicists ask how the temperature of a gas — a macro-level property — arises from the motions of particles that are not themselves "hot" or "cold" in any meaningful sense.

Epicurus and Lucretius had a comprehensive answer to this question. It was not a vague gesture toward complexity but a worked-out philosophical position grounded in careful observation and argument. This article traces that answer from its philosophical foundations, through the evidence in Epicurus's own surviving letters, to the full range of illustrations developed by Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of Things").[1] Along the way, we will draw on an important argument by the classicist David Sedley about what the Epicurean position actually means — an argument that rescues Epicurean physics from a misreading that would make it far less interesting and far less adequate as a philosophy of nature than it actually is.

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## The Misreading Epicurus Must Not Be Given

Before we can appreciate what Epicurus actually said, we need to clear away a tempting misreading that has shadowed the reception of atomist philosophy from antiquity to the present.

The misreading runs as follows: if everything is made of atoms and void, then everything that exists is *nothing but* atoms and void. Colors, tastes, emotions, thoughts, the love of a parent for a child, the beauty of a sunset — all of these are, in the end, just atoms. The higher-level description is merely convenient shorthand for what is "really" happening at the atomic level. This view is sometimes called *eliminative reductionism*: the position that higher-level properties are not genuinely real but only appear real because we lack the ability or the patience to track what is happening at the fundamental level.

This view would make Epicurean philosophy philosophically destructive rather than philosophically liberating. If pleasure is "just" atomic motion, the claim that pleasure is the natural guide of life becomes trivial — equivalent to saying that certain atomic configurations are the natural guide of life, which says nothing meaningful to any living person. If the fear of death is "just" a set of false atomic patterns in the brain, the project of correcting it through philosophical understanding becomes puzzling — why should atomic patterns respond to philosophical argument? If friendship is "nothing but" atoms, the Epicurean in-

sistence that friendship is one of the greatest goods wisdom can secure is drained of the significance it clearly has in everything Epicurus wrote.

Epicurus did not hold this view. The evidence of his own texts makes this clear, and David Sedley has argued the point with philosophical precision in his paper "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism."

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## Sedley's Argument: The Real World Is the Observable World

In "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism," Sedley addresses a puzzle about how Epicurus argued against the strict determinism of Democritus — the view that every event in the universe is the necessary outcome of prior atomic motions and that genuine freedom of the will is therefore impossible. The standard explanation is that Epicurus introduced the atomic swerve — the small, spontaneous, uncaused deviation in an atom's path — as a physical basis for free will. That is part of the answer, but Sedley argues that it is not the whole answer, and that the deeper move Epicurus makes is philosophically more significant.

Sedley's core argument is that Epicurus rejected strict atomic reductionism as a general principle about what is real. For Epicurus, the things we observe — the objects, events, and properties accessible to the senses — are just as real as the atoms and void that underlie them. This is not merely a practical concession to common sense. It is a philosophical position with serious theoretical weight: compound things have their own genuine properties, their own genuine causal powers, and their own genuine existence, which cannot simply be eliminated in favor of a purely atomic description.

Sedley calls this "anti-reductionism." The Epicurean universe has two genuinely real levels: the level of atoms and void, and the level of compound things observable by the senses. Neither level cancels the other. Both are epistemically and ontologically legitimate. The properties of compound things are not mere appearances masking the "real" atomic truth — they are real properties of real things, grounded in but not reducible to the atomic level.

This is what the modern philosophy of science calls emergence — though the concept itself is exactly what Epicurus described two thousand years earlier. The

label is modern; the insight is ancient. When contemporary philosophers and scientists speak of emergence as if it were a discovery of the twentieth century, they are giving a new name to a position that Epicurus articulated with greater philosophical clarity than most of its modern proponents. And it has profound consequences that run through every part of Epicurean philosophy.

The consequence for determinism, which is Sedley's focus, is this: if compound things have their own genuine causal powers — if a human being's decision is a real causal event, not merely an alias for a collection of atomic motions — then the claim that every event is strictly determined by prior atomic events is false. The real causal history of the world includes events at the level of compound things: decisions, thoughts, emotions, social interactions. These are not reducible without remainder to atomic events, and therefore determinism at the atomic level does not entail determinism of everything. There is genuine openness in the world because the world is genuinely layered, with each layer possessing its own real causal structure.

But the consequences extend beyond free will. Anti-reductionism means that pleasure is genuinely real — not an atomic alias but a real property of real compounds. It means that friendship is genuinely real. It means that the beauty of a poem is genuinely real. It means that the fear of death, which Epicurean philosophy sets out to cure, is a real psychological condition with real causal power — and therefore can be genuinely addressed by genuine understanding. The entire Epicurean philosophical project becomes coherent precisely because emergence is taken seriously: the real world that philosophy engages with is the world of observable compounds, not the sub-visible world of atoms.

With this framework in place, we can turn to Epicurus's own texts to see how he developed and applied the understanding of emergence.

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## The Letters of Epicurus: Emergence in the Primary Texts

Three letters by Epicurus survive, preserved by Diogenes Laertius. The *Letter to Herodotus* is the primary source for Epicurean physics and is the text most relevant to emergence. The *Letter to Menoeceus* addresses ethics but contains import-

ant implications. The *Letter to Pythocles* addresses celestial phenomena. Together they provide a substantial body of evidence for how Epicurus understood the relationship between the atomic level and the observable world.

### The Letter to Herodotus: Properties of Compounds

The most direct treatment of emergence in the surviving Epicurean texts is Epicurus's account of the secondary properties — the observable qualities of things — in the *Letter to Herodotus*. Epicurus is explicit and careful: atoms themselves have only a limited set of primary properties — size, shape, and weight. They do not individually possess color, temperature, smell, taste, or any of the secondary qualities that characterize the observable world. Yet the compounds formed by atoms genuinely possess these qualities. This is emergence stated plainly.

Epicurus writes that we must affirm the reality of these properties without attributing them to individual atoms:

> We must not suppose that color is an intrinsic property of atoms... but that the various colors arise from various arrangements, positions, and groupings.

This is a crucial statement. Color is not being dismissed as an illusion or declared unreal. Epicurus says colors "arise" — they are generated by the compound arrangement. They are real properties of real things. But they are emergent properties: real at the compound level, absent at the atomic level.

The same analysis applies to every secondary quality. Temperature — the warmth of a fire, the cold of ice — is not a property of individual atoms but arises from how atoms are arranged and how they interact with our sense organs. Taste — the sweetness of honey, the bitterness of gall — is not present in any atom but emerges from atomic configurations and their interactions with the tongue. Smell is absent from atoms individually but present in compounds through the stream of atomic films they shed.

Each of these is an instance of the same fundamental pattern: properties that are absent at the level of the basic constituents appear as real, causally effective features of the compounds those constituents form.

## The Whole and Its Parts

Epicurus also addresses directly, in the *Letter to Herodotus*, the relationship between a compound as a whole and its constituent parts. He insists that a compound body — an aggregate of atoms — is not merely the sum of its parts in a strict additive sense. The whole has properties and behaviors that the parts, considered individually, do not possess and cannot explain.

He uses the term "the whole" (*to holon*) deliberately and with philosophical weight. The whole is a genuine unit. It is the whole that acts, the whole that is perceived, the whole that has color and weight and temperature as experienced features. The parts — the constituent atoms — do not act in all the same ways, do not have color or temperature as experienced features, and cannot individually account for what the whole does and is.

This is the "whole is greater than the sum of its parts" insight in its most precise ancient formulation. And it is stated as a positive philosophical position, not as a concession to common sense or as a provisional description pending better atomic analysis. Epicurus held it as genuinely true of the world.

## Sensation and the Soul

Perhaps the most striking example of emergence in the *Letter to Herodotus* is Epicurus's account of sensation and the soul. The soul, for Epicurus, is a material compound — it consists of very fine, smooth, round atoms, distributed throughout the body, along with a still finer element for which he acknowledges there is no established name. The soul is thoroughly physical.

And yet sensation — the actual experience of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling — is a property of this material compound that no individual atom possesses. Individual atoms do not see. They do not hear. They do not experience pain or pleasure. The property of sensation emerges from the specific compound that the soul constitutes, and it disappears when that compound dissolves at death.

Epicurus is explicit that sensation is a genuine property — not an illusion, not a shorthand for something more fundamental, but a real feature of real compounds. The entire Epicurean epistemology depends on this: if sensation were not genuinely real, it could not serve as the criterion of truth. The foundational

role of sensation in Epicurean theory of knowledge is only coherent on the assumption that sensation is a genuinely emergent property of the kind of compound the soul represents — present at the compound level, absent at the atomic level, but no less real for that.

The *Letter to Herodotus* also gives Epicurus's account of how the soul, precisely because of its emergent property of sensation, can experience pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain are not properties of atoms. They are properties of ensouled compounds — living beings — whose souls are capable of the kind of interaction with the world that produces these experiences. This grounds the entire Epicurean ethics in a physical reality: pleasure is real, pain is real, and they are real because they are emergent properties of real compounds.

### The Letter to Menoeceus: Emergence and the Good Life

The *Letter to Menoeceus* is primarily an ethical text, but it rests on the emergent reality of psychological states in a way that calls for explicit acknowledgment. When Epicurus writes that pleasure is the beginning and end of the good life, he is relying on the reality of pleasure as an emergent property of a living compound. When he discusses the fear of death and offers the argument that death is nothing to us — "so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist" — he is relying on the emergent reality of the self as a compound whose dissolution ends the subject of experience.[2]

The argument about death is itself a striking application of emergence: the self is a real emergent entity constituted by a specific atomic compound (the soul within the body). Its emergence from that compound is genuine — the self really exists while the compound holds together. But it does not exist independently of the compound. When the compound dissolves, the self genuinely ceases, not because it never was real, but because real emergent properties depend on the continued existence of the compounds that generate them.

This is what makes Epicurus's argument about death different from Plato's. Plato held that the soul is a non-material entity existing independently of the body — on that view, death is a transition, not an ending, and can be feared or hoped for as such. Epicurus held that the soul is a real but emergent compound — on that view, death is a genuine dissolution of the entity that might fear or hope for

anything, and there is therefore no subject remaining to experience any condition. The argument only works because emergence is being taken seriously: the soul is genuinely real as an emergent compound, and it genuinely ceases when the compound dissolves.

### Happiness as an Emergent Property of the Good Life

The *Letter to Menoeceus* also gives us what may be the most important ethical application of emergence in all of Epicurean philosophy, though it is rarely recognized as such: the emergence of happiness itself from the complementary components of a fully lived human life.

Epicurus is careful to distinguish individual pleasures and individual pains from the overall condition of happiness (*eudaimonia*). Happiness is not simply the sum of the individual pleasures a person experiences — a running total in which pleasures are added and pains subtracted to arrive at a net figure. Happiness is a qualitatively different condition that emerges from the full range of what a complete human life involves: pleasure and pain as natural complements, love and the capacity for righteous anger as two expressions of the same underlying commitment to what is genuinely good, the full emotional range of a person fully engaged with reality rather than withdrawn from it.

This matters because the simplest version of the emergence claim — happiness arises when pleasure predominates over pain — is accurate as far as it goes but incomplete. It suggests a kind of arithmetic: get more pleasure than pain, and happiness follows. But the Epicurean picture developed in our recent analysis of love and hate as complementary pairs complicates this in an important way. The capacity for genuine love — the kind of love that generates real happiness — is inseparable from the capacity for the anger that protects what is loved. The person who has eliminated the capacity for righteous anger has also diminished their capacity for love, and with it their capacity for the deepest form of happiness. You cannot have the emergent property of a full musical chord by removing one of the notes that constitutes it.

What produces genuine happiness, then, is not the mere predominance of pleasant experiences over painful ones — it is a life in which the full complementary structure of human experience is engaged correctly: natural desires satisfied, nat-

ural anger directed appropriately at real intentional harm rather than dissipated into empty fury or suppressed into passivity, natural love extended to genuine friends whose wellbeing genuinely matters, natural fear applied to real dangers and dissolved when groundless, natural grief acknowledged and processed rather than denied. From this correct engagement with the full range of complementary human experience emerges something that no individual pleasure in isolation contains or produces: the condition of genuinely flourishing.

Consider what this means concretely. A person who has achieved a kind of pleasant numbness — who feels neither great pain nor great love nor righteous anger nor deep friendship, but simply a low-level undisturbed contentment — has not achieved Epicurean happiness. They have avoided some pains, but they have also avoided the complementary pleasures that only genuine engagement produces. The happiness that Epicurus describes requires the whole person: capable of deep attachment and the anger that defends it, capable of genuine pleasure and honest acknowledgment of genuine pain, capable of the full range of natural emotional life lived wisely rather than lived in reduced form.

This is emergence in ethics at its deepest level. Just as color is absent from individual atoms but genuinely present in the compound they form, happiness is absent from individual pleasures but genuinely present in the life organized around correct engagement with its full complementary range. Just as life cannot be found in any individual atom but is a real property of the right kind of compound, happiness cannot be found in any individual experience but is a real property of the right kind of life — one that includes the full spectrum of what natural human engagement with a real world requires.

Epicurus makes the resilience of this happiness explicit when he writes that the sage can be happy even on the rack: the philosophical understanding, genuine friendships, and correct emotional engagement that generate happiness are not dissolved by physical pain. The organization that produces happiness remains intact even when individual moments are painful, just as the living creature remains alive even when some of its atoms are temporarily displaced.

The full-cup metaphor that appears in the Epicurean tradition captures this precisely. A cup full of good wine is not "a collection of wine molecules at a certain location" — it is a cup of wine, with all the properties that entails: color, taste,

fragrance, and the capacity to produce pleasure in someone who drinks it. The fullness of the cup is a real emergent property of its contents as organized in that vessel. Similarly, a life full of genuine friendship, correct emotional engagement, philosophical understanding, and the freedom from groundless fear that understanding provides is not a collection of discrete pleasant experiences — it is a full life, with the emergent property of happiness that such a life and only such a life produces. The whole is genuinely greater than the sum of its parts.

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## Lucretius: The Full Philosophical Poem of Emergence

Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, written roughly two and a half centuries after Epicurus and regarded by the Epicurean tradition as the greatest Latin exposition of Epicurean physics, is in significant respects an extended meditation on emergence. The poem returns to the theme again and again, developing it through argument, analogy, and vivid description. What Epicurus states with philosophical terseness, Lucretius unfolds with poetic force and a range of illustrations that make the abstract principle tangible.

### The Master Analogy: Letters and Words

The single most important illustration of emergence in Lucretius — and one of the most important in the history of philosophy — is the analogy of letters forming words. It appears multiple times in *De Rerum Natura* and serves as Lucretius's master example of how the same simple constituents, differently arranged, can produce radically different properties in the resulting compound.

The letters of the alphabet are a fixed set of simple elements. Individually, each letter has a limited set of properties: a shape, a position in the sequence, the sounds it can represent. But when letters combine to form words, the resulting word has properties that no individual letter possesses: meaning, rhythm, a specific referential relationship to something in the world. The word "fire" is hot in a way that the letter F is not. The word "honey" is sweet in a way that the letter H is not. The meaning emerges from the combination.

And crucially, the same letters rearranged produce entirely different words with entirely different properties. The letters of LOVE rearranged give VOLE — a

small rodent, emphatically different from love. The letters of CARE rearranged give RACE — a different concept entirely. Same elements, same quantity, same basic constituents: radically different compounds with radically different properties.

Lucretius applies this analogy explicitly to atoms:

> The same elements make up sky, sea, earth, rivers, sun — the same make up crops, trees, and animals. But they move and mix and mingle in different ways. Here you can see in our verses letter mixed with letter, many words sharing many letters in common, yet you must acknowledge that verses and words are composed of different letters in different positions. So with matter: when the motions, order, positions, and shapes of elements change, the things they compose must change as well.

The analogy is not merely decorative. It makes a precise philosophical point: the relationship between atoms and the compounds they form is not additive but combinatorial. Letters combined in the right way do not produce a louder version of individual letters — they produce something categorically different, with properties that did not exist at the level of the individual elements. The same is true of atoms: combined in the right ways, they do not produce "more atom" — they produce color, life, thought, and love.

This is emergence stated with elegant precision. The new properties are real. They are not illusions, not mere appearances, not convenient fictions. The word genuinely means something; the compound genuinely is colored; the living creature genuinely experiences pleasure and pain. But these real properties belong to the compound as a whole, not to the individual letters or atoms that constitute it.

### Color: Atoms Are Colorless, the World Is Vivid

Lucretius devotes substantial space in Book II of *De Rerum Natura* to the question of color — one of the most vivid and philosophically clear examples of emergence in the entire poem. His argument has two complementary parts: first, that atoms individually have no color; second, that the colored world we observe is nonetheless genuinely and fully real.

The argument that atoms are colorless begins from the nature of color itself. Color, for Lucretius, is a relational property — it depends on the interaction between an object's surface, the films of atoms it sheds, and the sense organs of an observer. Color is not a fixed intrinsic feature sitting inside things waiting to be seen; it arises in the relationship between emitter and receiver. This relational character means that color simply does not apply at the atomic level, where atoms have no surfaces in the relevant sense and no relationship with sense organs.

Lucretius also offers a striking empirical argument. Feathers from a dove's neck and throat are, in normal light, one color; caught at a different angle they flash crimson, then green, then the deep blue of the sea. The same surface, the same atoms, the same observer — but a different relational configuration produces a different color. This shows that color is not simply "in" the atoms; it is produced by relationships that change as the geometry changes. Color is genuinely emergent.

Yet Lucretius insists with equal force that the colors we see are genuinely real. The brilliant blue of the sea is not an illusion to be set aside in favor of a truer atomic description. It is a real property of the real sea — a property that emerges from atomic arrangements and relational configurations, but a property no less real for that. To see blue where blue appears is to have genuine knowledge. The colorless atoms and the colored sea are both real; they exist at different levels of description, each level valid for what it is.

He develops this through a remarkable image: imagine pouring white pigment into a vat one drop at a time. Each drop is white. But when you look into the vat, you may see a different color entirely — crimson, say, or scarlet — because the white drops have mixed with something else in a way that produces a new color from their combination. The white of each drop has not been destroyed; it has participated in producing something different. The emergent color of the mixture is real, and the whiteness of the individual drops is real, and neither reality cancels the other.

This is precisely the structure of emergence: real properties at each level, with higher-level properties genuinely arising from lower-level constituents without being simply present in those constituents individually.

### Life: From Inert Matter to the Living World

Book II of *De Rerum Natura* contains Lucretius's account of how living things arise from non-living atomic matter — one of the most philosophically ambitious treatments of emergence in the ancient world. The individual atoms that compose a living creature have no life. They do not breathe, grow, reproduce, or respond to their environment. They are inert particles whose only intrinsic properties are size, shape, and weight. Yet the specific compounds these atoms form are alive, in the full biological sense: they breathe, grow, reproduce, perceive, and respond.

Life is the most striking example of emergence available to the ancient world. It cannot be decomposed into atomicity. There is no "atom of life" — no single particle that is alive in the way individual atoms have shape and weight. Life is a property of specific kinds of compound systems, arising from the specific organization of their constituents, present at the compound level, absent at the atomic level.

Lucretius addresses this with a confidence that modern biology, for all its greater knowledge, has not made obsolete. The emergence of life from non-living matter is not philosophically mysterious on Epicurean premises — it is an instance of the same general truth that governs all emergence: the right combination of the right constituents in the right arrangement can produce genuinely new properties. Life is one such property; it is real, not illusory, but emergent rather than fundamental.

He develops this further in Book V, where he describes the original spontaneous arising of living creatures from the earth itself — the earth as a kind of universal mother giving birth to plants and animals as new emergent configurations of atomic matter. This is not creation from nothing (which Epicurean physics categorically denies) but the emergence of new kinds of things from the recombination of existing atoms in new arrangements. The atoms were always there; life was not. The new property — life — emerged when the atomic configuration reached the right kind of complexity and organization.

**Sensation and Mind: The Emergence of Experience**

In Book III of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius addresses sensation and mind — the emergence of experience from non-experiencing matter. This is the deepest application of emergence in the ancient world, and it remains one of the deepest challenges for any materialist philosophy.

The argument runs parallel to the account of life. Individual atoms have no sensation. They do not see, hear, feel, or think. They cannot be pained or pleased. Yet the compound they form — the soul, distributed through the body — genuinely sees, hears, feels, and thinks. Sensation is an emergent property of the soul compound, just as color is an emergent property of a colored surface, just as life is an emergent property of a living organism.

Lucretius offers a particularly striking illustration of this principle. Take a stone. Pound it with a hammer. Does the stone feel pain? No — it has no sensation, no soul, no capacity for experience. Now cut your finger with that stone. You feel pain — genuine, real pain. The pain is an emergent property of your compound body and soul, not of the individual atoms of which you are composed. Those atoms, scattered to the void at your death, will never feel anything again. But while they are organized into the specific compound that you are, they participate in a system that genuinely experiences the world.

This argument is the foundation of Epicurus's case about death. The atoms that compose you will continue to exist after your death — they are eternal and indestructible. But the compound they currently form will dissolve, and with it the emergent property of sensation will disappear. "You" — the experiencing subject — are an emergent property of the compound, not a property of the individual atoms. Death dissolves the compound; sensation disappears; there is no remaining subject to experience any condition. The fear of what follows death is therefore groundless, not because death is unreal, but because the experiencing self is a real emergent property that genuinely ceases when the compound that generates it dissolves.

The emergentist account of mind also grounds Lucretius's treatment of the emotions in Book III and IV. Love, grief, joy, fear, anger — these are real properties of experiencing compounds, not illusions or mere labels for atomic configurations. They have genuine causal power: love causes specific behaviors; grief

causes others; fear yet others. The Epicurean therapeutic project of working through the emotions philosophically makes sense only because emotions are genuinely real properties of genuinely real compound beings. You cannot therapeutically address an illusion.

### The Flock on the Hillside: Emergence in the Visual World

Book II of *De Rerum Natura* contains one of the most beautiful illustrations of emergence in all ancient literature. Lucretius describes a hillside covered with a flock of sheep, each white, cropping the grass in the sun. Seen up close, each sheep is white. But seen from a distance, the flock appears as a golden shimmer on the green hillside — a property that no individual sheep possesses, and that the sheep in aggregate genuinely produce.

This is emergence made visually immediate. The golden shimmer on the hillside is real — it is what an observer genuinely sees. It is not an illusion, not a mistake, not a less-accurate description of something that is "really" a flock of white sheep. It is a real optical property of the aggregate, absent from any individual member, genuinely present in the whole.

Lucretius uses this image as one of several illustrations of how individual elements without a given property can combine to produce a compound genuinely possessing that property. The same logic applies to atoms without color combining to produce colored compounds, to atoms without sensation combining to produce sensing creatures, to atoms without life combining to produce living organisms.

The hillside image has another dimension that Lucretius intends: it illustrates the reliability of different levels of description. The observer who sees the golden shimmer from a distance is not making an error that closer inspection would correct. Both descriptions — "a flock of white sheep" and "a golden shimmer on the hillside" — are true descriptions of the same reality seen at different levels and distances. Neither cancels the other. The man who says "that is a golden shimmer" is not wrong; the man who says "those are white sheep" is not more accurate; each is describing a real property of a real thing at the level of observation appropriate to his position.

This is the epistemological complement to the ontological point about emergence: multiple levels of description can each be genuinely true, corresponding to genuinely real properties at different levels of organization. The Epicurean insistence on the reliability of sensation means that what sensation reports at each level is genuinely real — the golden shimmer no less than the individual sheep.

### The Sea's Roar: Sound as Emergence

Individual water atoms make no sound. They have no vocal organs, no surfaces capable of setting air in motion in the relevant way, no capacity for the wave-like propagation that constitutes sound. And yet the sea roars. Stand on a cliff above the ocean in a storm and the sound is overwhelming — a genuine property of the aggregate body of water that is entirely absent from any individual particle composing it.

Lucretius returns to the sounds of nature throughout *De Rerum Natura* as illustrations of emergence. The crash of surf, the rumble of thunder, the hiss of a fire, the song of a bird — each of these is a real, observable property of a compound system, absent from the individual constituents of that system. Each illustrates the same principle: the whole generates properties that the parts do not possess.

The sound of the sea is particularly apt as an illustration because it is so obviously not a property of individual water molecules. The question "what does a water molecule sound like?" is nonsensical — it has no answer because sound is a property that simply does not apply at that level. But the question "what does the sea sound like?" has a vivid, definite answer that any person who has heard it can confirm. The property is real, and it belongs to the compound, and it emerges from the organization of the compound rather than being carried by any individual element.

### Thunder and Lightning: The Emergence of Natural Phenomena

Book VI of *De Rerum Natura* addresses a range of dramatic natural phenomena — thunder, lightning, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, the flooding of the Nile, the properties of the Avernian Lake. All of these are treated as emergent phenomena: real, observable events with definite properties that arise from the natural organization and interaction of material processes, not from divine intervention or supernatural cause.

This is a significant application of emergence in the Epicurean framework. The terror of a thunderstorm — real, visceral, overwhelming — is an emergent property of a real natural process, not a divine message. To understand what lightning actually is (an electrical discharge, though Lucretius describes it in terms of fire atoms compressed and violently released from storm clouds) is not to diminish its reality but to understand its actual nature as an emergent phenomenon of natural processes.

The philosophical importance of this application is practical and therapeutic. One of the primary sources of the groundless fear that Epicurean philosophy aims to cure is the interpretation of dramatic natural phenomena as divine communications — as punishment for impiety, warning of worse to come, evidence of divine governance of the world. If lightning is a divine weapon, the only rational response is terror and propitiation. If lightning is an emergent natural phenomenon, the rational response is understanding — which drains it of its power to terrify without diminishing its reality as a powerful and dangerous event.

Emergence here does therapeutic work: it explains the phenomena completely and naturally, accounts for their real properties (their force, their danger, their dramatic character), while simultaneously removing the false additional property — divine intentionality — that was the source of groundless fear.

**Human Civilization: The Emergence of Culture**

One of the most remarkable passages in *De Rerum Natura* is Lucretius's account of the development of human civilization in Book V. Beginning from human beings living in conditions little better than animals — sheltering in caves, eating raw food, dying young — Lucretius traces the emergence of language, family life, social organization, agriculture, crafts, art, music, and law.

This is emergence at the scale of culture. Individual human beings, no different in their atomic composition from other animals, give rise — through their specific organizational capacities, their ability to form social bonds and transmit learned behavior — to a civilizational level of reality that is genuinely new. Language is an emergent property of human social life: no individual human "has" language in the way they have a body; language exists in the interactions among

people. Law is an emergent property of organized communities: no individual "has" law; law exists in the shared practices and expectations of groups.

Lucretius presents this emergence as a natural process — not guided by divine providence, not the result of a divine gift or a contract theory of the kind that would later become standard in political philosophy, but a spontaneous development of properties at the social level from the natural capacities of individual human beings. The emergence of civilization is continuous with the emergence of life from matter and of sensation from the soul compound: each level of organization gives rise to new properties that were absent at the level below.

Crucially, these emergent cultural properties are real. Law is genuinely binding — not because it was divinely decreed or rationally constructed, but because it is a real property of the social compound that has genuine causal force in the lives of the individuals who constitute that compound. Language genuinely means things. Art genuinely moves people. Music genuinely produces joy or grief. These are all emergent properties of specific kinds of compound systems, and their reality is not diminished by their emergence.

**Free Will: The Deepest Emergence**

The most philosophically significant emergent property in the Epicurean universe is free will — the genuine capacity of a living, thinking, experiencing compound to initiate actions that are not strictly determined by prior atomic events.

This is where Sedley's argument about anti-reductionism comes to its most important application. In Book II, Lucretius presents the famous argument for the atomic swerve as the physical basis for free will:

> If all movement is always one long chain, and new movement arises out of the old in order fixed, and atoms do not swerve and make a start of movement that can break the bonds of fate and stop one cause from following cause from infinity — then whence comes this free will, this will wrested from the fates, this will by which we move wherever pleasure leads?

The swerve introduces genuine indeterminacy at the atomic level. But as Sedley argues, the swerve alone is insufficient to explain free will. A random swerve in an atom is not the same as a free choice — randomness is not freedom. The full Epicurean account of free will requires the anti-reductionist insight: that the

thinking, choosing self is a genuinely real emergent entity with its own causal powers.

When you decide to reach for a cup of water, that decision is a real causal event. It is not merely an alias for a collection of atomic motions that would have occurred regardless of your decision. The decision — an emergent property of your compound soul — genuinely causes the reaching. This is possible because the emergent level is genuinely causally efficacious, not merely epiphenomenal (not merely "along for the ride" while atoms do all the real work).

Free will, on this account, is the emergence of genuine top-down causation: the whole compound (you, as a thinking being with desires, beliefs, and the capacity for deliberation) genuinely affecting the behavior of its parts (the atoms of your body moving in response to your decision). This top-down causation is only possible if the whole is genuinely real and not merely a convenient description of what atoms are doing independently of any decision.

This is the deepest and most important emergent property in Epicurean philosophy because it is the physical and philosophical foundation of the entire ethical project. Ethics — the project of living a good life through intelligent choice — makes sense only if choices are real, only if the self that chooses is real, only if the understanding that guides choice genuinely affects behavior. All of this requires that emergence be taken seriously as a real feature of the world.

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## The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts: Summing Up the Epicurean Account

The examples gathered from Epicurus's letters and Lucretius's poem can now be organized around the central philosophical point.

At the atomic level, the only real properties are size, shape, and weight (and for Epicurus, the swerve). These are all there is to any individual atom. There is no color, no temperature, no sound, no taste, no smell, no life, no sensation, no thought, no emotion, no choice. The atomistic description at this level is complete.

And yet, the observable world is saturated with color, temperature, sound, taste, smell, life, sensation, thought, emotion, and choice. These are not illusions, not mere appearances, not convenient descriptions of what is "really" just atomic motion. They are genuine properties of genuine compounds — real features of a real world that exists at a different level of organization than the atomic level.

The relationship between the two levels is what the Epicurean tradition describes through the concept of emergence. The word they use — drawing on Epicurus's careful language in the *Letter to Herodotus* — is that these properties "arise" from atomic combinations. They are generated by the organization of atoms in specific ways, without being present in those atoms individually. They belong to the whole compound in a way they do not belong to any part.

This is the sense in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Not "greater" in a vague, mystical sense that invokes something beyond matter. "Greater" in the precise sense that the compound genuinely possesses properties — real, causally effective properties — that are simply absent from its individual constituents. The sea is greater than the sum of its water molecules because the sea roars and has tides and can drown you, and none of these things is true of any individual molecule. The living creature is greater than the sum of its atoms because the living creature experiences pleasure and pain and makes choices, and none of these things is true of any individual atom. You are greater than the sum of your atoms because you love, think, fear, and hope — and none of these things belong to any single particle of which you are composed.

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## Why This Matters: Epicurean Emergence Against Modern Reductionism

The Epicurean account of emergence has not become obsolete with the advance of science. If anything, it has become more timely. Modern science faces the problem of emergence in its most acute form in the philosophy of mind: how does consciousness arise from neural processes? The "hard problem of consciousness" — why physical processes give rise to subjective experience at all — is precisely the ancient question of how sensation arises from atoms, pressed now with neurological precision.

The Epicurean answer is not to dissolve the question by saying that consciousness is "nothing but" neural firing, nor to invoke some non-material soul substance that stands outside the material world. The Epicurean answer is the emergentist one: consciousness is a genuine property of genuinely complex organized systems, absent at the level of individual neurons (which have no experience), present at the level of the compound brain and nervous system, real and causally effective at the compound level without being reducible to the component level.

This does not solve the hard problem in the sense of explaining mechanistically how experience arises from matter. But it establishes the correct philosophical framework for approaching it: experience is real, matter is real, and the emergence of experience from matter is a genuine feature of a world that is organized in layers, each layer genuinely real, with genuinely real properties at each level.

### Thomas Jefferson's Epicurean Answer

The Epicurean framework for thinking about consciousness and emergence was stated with remarkable clarity — and in explicit continuity with the Epicurean tradition — by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to John Adams dated August 15, 1820. Jefferson was replying to a letter from Adams that had kept him, he said, from sleep, with its "croud of scepticisms" about matter, spirit, and motion. His response is as direct and Epicurean as anything written in the two thousand years since Epicurus:

> I feel: therefore I exist. I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them matter. I feel them changing place. this gives me motion. where there is an absence of matter, I call it void, or nothing, or immaterial space. on the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.

This is Epicurean canonics in a single paragraph. The starting point is sensation — *I feel* — not Descartes's *I think*. The building blocks are matter and void, identified through the reports of sensation. And from this foundation, Jefferson says, we can build everything we genuinely need to know.

On the specific question of whether matter can think — whether consciousness can be an emergent property of organized matter — Jefferson's answer is a model of what we might now call Epicurean anti-reductionism:

> I can conceive thought to be an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by its creator, as well as that attraction is an action of matter, or magnetism of loadstone.

This is the emergence argument stated plainly: thought is an *action* — a property, a capacity, something that organized matter *does* — just as gravitational attraction is something matter does, and magnetism is something a lodestone does. We do not demand that the physicist explain *how* matter produces gravitational attraction before we accept that it does; the observable fact is sufficient. Jefferson's argument is that the same standard applies to thought and consciousness: if you accept that matter can attract other matter without a non-material explanation of the mechanism, you cannot consistently demand that the materialist provide a non-material explanation of how matter thinks before accepting that it does.

> when he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called thinking shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called attraction, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialist may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking.

This argument is directly parallel to the Epicurean position developed throughout this article. The properties of compound systems — including the property of thought — do not require us to explain the mechanism of their emergence before we accept their reality. What they require is the recognition that organized matter genuinely produces properties absent from its individual constituents. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts — and the materialist is not obligated to provide a complete mechanical account of *how* before accepting *that*.

Jefferson closes this part of his argument with a sentence that could have been taken directly from the *Letter to Herodotus*:

> when once we quit the basis of sensation all is in the wind. to talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings.

This is Epicurean canonics in its most uncompromising form. Sensation is the foundation; departure from it produces only empty words. The claim that some-

thing non-material — a soul, a God, an angel — lies behind or above the material world is not a meaningful claim about something real but a claim about nothing, dressed in language that sounds meaningful. Jefferson says this directly: to say that the human soul, angels, and God are immaterial is to say they are nothings, or that there is no God, no angels, no soul. A God made of nothing is indistinguishable from no God at all.

Jefferson, writing in 1820, was drawing explicitly on what he called "my creed of materialism," supported, he said, by Locke, Tracy, and Stewart.[3] He chose not to mention that he was restating a position Epicurus had worked out two thousand years earlier. But the continuity is unmistakable: the same foundational commitment to sensation as the criterion of truth, the same identification of matter and void as the basic categories of existence, the same anti-reductionist recognition that organized matter produces genuine new properties, the same refusal to demand a non-material explanation for emergent phenomena.

The Epicurean who reads Jefferson's letter to Adams recognizes it immediately. It is the Letter to Herodotus in the language of an eighteenth-century Virginia planter — and it is no less persuasive for that.

### The Epicurean Position Endures

The Epicurean position also provides a powerful argument against the eliminative materialism that sometimes accompanies modern neuroscience — the view that mental states are "nothing but" neural processes, that consciousness is an illusion generated by the brain, that the self is a story the brain tells itself. This view, pushed to its logical conclusion, eliminates the very observer who is supposed to be doing science. If experience is unreal, there is no one to do experiments; if the self is an illusion, there is no scientist to have the illusion. Epicurean anti-reductionism avoids this conclusion: the experiencing self is real, its experiences are real, its choices are real, and the fact that all of these are grounded in material processes does not diminish their reality at the level at which they exist and operate.

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## Conclusion: Epicurus as the First Philosopher of Emergence

The concept of emergence did not begin with twentieth-century philosophy of science. It was worked out carefully and illustrated with precision by Epicurus in the fourth century BC and developed by Lucretius in the first century BC into one of the most comprehensive accounts of how a material world gives rise to all the richness of observable reality. That it was then restated — largely independently — by Thomas Jefferson in 1820 is a reminder of how durable and how natural the position is: it follows from taking seriously what the senses actually report and refusing to explain it away.

The key moves are:

**First**, the anti-reductionist principle: the observable world is just as real as the atomic world. Properties at the compound level are genuine, not illusory, not eliminable in favor of a purely atomic description. This is Sedley's core insight about what Epicurus was actually doing.

**Second**, the identification of specific emergent properties: color, temperature, sound, taste, smell, life, sensation, thought, emotion, and free choice — each absent at the atomic level, each genuinely present at the compound level, each arising from atomic organization without being reducible to it.

**Third**, the master analogy of letters and words: the same elements differently arranged produce categorically different compounds with categorically different properties. The analogy captures emergence with philosophical precision and makes it intuitively accessible.

**Fourth**, the therapeutic application: understanding emergence removes the false additional properties — divine intentionality, supernatural governance, cosmic punishment — that generate groundless fear. Thunder is an emergent natural phenomenon; it is not a divine weapon. This understanding is liberating not because it diminishes thunder's reality but because it correctly characterizes that reality.

**Fifth**, the ethical application: the self, pleasure, pain, thought, and choice are all emergent properties of real compounds. They are genuinely real, genuinely caus-

ally effective, and genuinely the appropriate objects of philosophical attention and therapeutic care. The Epicurean project of living a pleasurable, fearless, friendship-filled life is grounded in the emergent reality of the very features of human experience that project engages with.

**Sixth** — and perhaps most important for the practical purpose of philosophy — happiness itself is an emergent property of the well-lived life, and it emerges not from pleasure alone but from correct engagement with the full complementary range of natural human experience. Pleasure and pain, love and the capacity for righteous anger, genuine attachment and honest acknowledgment of loss — these are not elements to be selectively included or excluded, but complementary components whose correct organization produces something none of them contains individually: a genuinely happy life. It is not the sum of individual pleasures, any more than the roar of the sea is the sum of the sounds of individual water molecules. The Epicurean full cup is not a cup with more liquid; it is a cup from which something different and greater flows — and it requires the whole range of what a full human life, correctly engaged with reality, makes possible.

The Epicurean universe is not a bleak landscape of atoms colliding in void. It is a richly layered reality in which atoms and void give rise to color and life and thought and love — not despite being material, but because material organization at sufficient complexity genuinely produces new kinds of things with new kinds of properties. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The world we observe is the real world. Philosophy, which lives at the level of thought and experience and choice, engages with something genuinely real. And the happy life — that greatest of all emergent properties — is available to anyone who understands what it is made of and how to build it.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Epicurean Physics and Modern Science: Five Core Claims That Endure

## Introduction: Logical Claims, Not Primitive Guesses

The most common way to dismiss Epicurean physics is to list the things Epicurus got wrong by modern standards. He underestimated the size of the sun. He did not anticipate the Big Bang. His account of atomic motion lacks quantum field theory. His description of how images reach the eye is not modern optics. These objections, repeated confidently in introductory philosophy courses, create the impression that Epicurean physics is a historical curiosity — the well-meaning fumbling of a pre-scientific age, interesting as an ancestor of atomism but now thoroughly superseded.

This impression rests on a fundamental misreading of what Epicurean physics is doing.

Epicurus was not attempting a systematic empirical account of specific natural phenomena that future discoveries might revise. He was explicit that in matters of celestial and meteorological detail — exact distances, precise mechanisms, the causes of particular weather events — multiple explanations consistent with the evidence should be kept open rather than one forced to the exclusion of all others. He knew that the instruments and vantage points available in the fourth century BC were insufficient to settle many specific questions, and he said so directly in the *Letter to Pythocles*.

What Epicurus was doing in his foundational physics was something different: establishing what must be true of any coherent account of a world in which we

observe what we actually observe. These are logical claims, not empirical predictions. They are grounded in universal human experience rather than in the findings of particular experiments. They function as guardrails — defining the space within which any adequate account of nature must operate — rather than as textbook entries to be updated whenever new data arrives.

Five of his most fundamental claims, examined against what physics has actually established, turn out to be confirmed rather than overturned.

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## One: Matter Is Not Infinitely Divisible

### The Logical Argument

Epicurus's argument for the existence of ultimate particles — minima, the genuine endpoints of physical division — begins not with any ancient chemistry but with a simple logical observation: infinite divisibility, taken seriously, destroys the possibility of finite things.

The reasoning runs in two directions. Any finite body, if infinitely divisible, would when divided completely yield an infinite number of parts — but an infinite sum of parts, however small each might be, is not finite. Finite bodies are finite, so the division must stop somewhere. The same holds for space: if it were infinitely divisible, traversing any finite distance would require completing an infinite number of sub-divisions, which has no endpoint. But we do cross rooms; light does reach us from the sun. Space cannot divide without limit either.

What Epicurus calls the "atom" — the word means, simply, *uncuttable* — is this logical endpoint, the smallest unit at which physical division stops. His claim makes no assertion about what that unit looks like, how it was discovered, what its internal properties are, or how far down the ladder of division we must go before we reach it. The only claim is that there is a bottom — that the ladder does not extend forever.

### The Modern Confirmation

Modern physics has spent the last two centuries discovering, layer by layer, successively smaller constituents of matter: Daltonian atoms, then nuclei and elec-

trons, then protons and neutrons, then quarks and leptons. At each stage, what had been assumed to be the bottom turned out to be composite. This pattern is sometimes offered as a refutation of Epicurean atomism: Epicurus thought he had found the bottom, and he was wrong.

But this reading confuses the logical claim with a specific empirical prediction that Epicurus never made. He never claimed that the particular particles known to fourth-century BC Greeks were the ultimate constituents of matter. He claimed that *some* level of ultimate constitution must exist. Every time a "bottom" has been found to be composite, physics has not refuted the Epicurean framework but relocated the endpoint — confirming at each step that the search for a bottom is the right search to be conducting.

The Standard Model of particle physics currently treats quarks, leptons, and gauge bosons as genuinely elementary — not composed of further sub-units detectable by any current or foreseeable experimental method. Whether these are the final answer or whether future physics will find deeper structure remains open. But the logical argument that there *must* be some ultimate level — because infinite divisibility leads to the absurdities Epicurus identified — remains intact regardless of where precisely that level turns out to be.

There is a specific modern parallel to Epicurus's concept of minimum parts: the Planck length, approximately $1.616 \times 10^{-35}$ meters, below which the conceptual frameworks of current physics cannot meaningfully apply. Whether the Planck length represents a genuine minimum unit of spatial extension is a question current theory cannot definitively answer. But the recognition that there is a scale below which present concepts break down is entirely consistent with the Epicurean logical argument — and entirely inconsistent with the notion that division proceeds without limit into an endless mathematical abyss.

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## Two: Both Matter and Space Are Infinite in Extent

### The Mutual-Bounding Argument

Epicurus's argument for the infinite extent of both matter and void proceeds through a simple thought experiment about what finite alternatives would pro-

duce. The relevant passage from Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura* Book One) gives the argument its most vivid form, but the logical structure is already in Epicurus's own letter:

If matter were finite in quantity but void infinite in extent, then the finite supply of atoms, scattered through an infinite emptiness with no boundary to contain them, would drift progressively further apart. Like the wreckage of a ship scattered across a limitless ocean, matter would never accumulate into the combinations that produce the world we observe. The atoms would disperse endlessly, never meeting, never combining. No worlds would form. But worlds do form — we inhabit one. Therefore matter cannot be finite.

If void were finite in extent but matter infinite in quantity, then matter would have no space in which to move, would be packed solid with no empty intervals, and motion would be impossible. But matter does move — we observe constant change in everything around us. Therefore void cannot be finite.

Neither can be finite without the other, and the only remaining option is that both are infinite — that the universe as a whole contains unlimited matter and unlimited space.

### Scale, Not Mechanism

The argument makes no assertion about how matter and void are distributed across the infinite whole — whether there are clusters and voids at large scales, whether structure repeats, whether our observable region is typical or unusual. It makes no claim about the local history of any particular region within the whole. It says only that the totality of what exists is not bounded — that there is no wall beyond which matter runs out and no edge of space beyond which void reaches its limit.

This matters enormously when modern cosmological observations are brought to bear. The observable universe — the region from which light has had time to reach us since the conditions for light propagation were established — is finite by definition. It has a horizon, a lookback limit, a characteristic scale. None of this contradicts the Epicurean claim, because the observable universe is not "the universe" in the Epicurean sense. It is one local region within the whole. The Epi-

curean claim is about the whole, which no finite observational window can rule out.

Modern cosmology, in fact, has difficulty ruling out an infinite universe even on its own terms. The flatness of spacetime measured by current observations is consistent with a globally infinite extent. Most cosmological models, including inflationary models, are agnostic on whether the total universe — the full spatial manifold, not just the observable patch — is finite or infinite. The Epicurean position remains fully defensible within modern physical cosmology.

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## Three: The Universe As a Whole Has No Beginning and No End

### The Logical Corollary

This is the most frequently misunderstood of the five claims, because it is most often read as a direct contradiction of Big Bang cosmology. That reading is incorrect, and correcting it requires precision about what "the universe" means in Epicurean physics.

The principle "nothing comes from nothing" (stated in the opening sections of both the *Letter to Herodotus* and *De Rerum Natura*) establishes that no quantity of matter or energy can arise from an absolute absence of anything. If this principle is true — and the orderliness of nature that makes science itself possible depends on its truth — then there was never a state in which absolutely nothing existed and from which everything subsequently arose. There must always have been *something*: matter, void, or both.

The complementary principle "nothing passes into nothing" establishes that no quantity of matter or energy can be annihilated into absolute non-existence. Therefore the future will always contain something. The universe as a whole — the total of what exists — neither began nor will end.

These conclusions follow strictly from the two conservation principles. They are not astronomical observations; they are logical inferences from premises that any coherent naturalism must accept.

### The Local and the Universal

The Big Bang is a claim about what happened in our local region of the universe approximately 13.8 billion years ago. More precisely, it is a claim about when and how the conditions of our observable cosmos — its characteristic density, temperature, and large-scale structure — were established from a prior state of extreme compression. It is not a claim that the universe as a whole arose from absolute non-existence.

Serious cosmologists recognize this distinction. The initial singularity of the classical Big Bang model is a mathematical artifact indicating where the equations of general relativity break down — not a physical description of what actually happened at the moment of origin. Whether there was something before the Big Bang (a prior contraction, an inflationary false vacuum, a broader multiverse structure) is an active area of theoretical work. What is agreed is that the equations stop working at the singularity, which means the classical Big Bang model is silent about any absolute beginning.

The Epicurean claim is about the totality of what exists — the infinite whole of which our observable region is one part. The claim is that this totality never came from nothing and will never dissolve into nothing. Whether our local region underwent a period of expansion from a hot dense state — whether our local cosmos had a "birthday" — is a separate question entirely, and one about which Epicurus himself acknowledged multiple possible explanations in the *Letter to Pythocles*. Local cosmogony (how our particular world formed) and universal cosmology (the nature of the infinite whole) are distinct topics, and Epicurus kept them distinct.

The logical pillars of Epicurean cosmology — nothing from nothing, nothing to nothing — remain entirely untouched by what modern physics has established about the history of our local region. They are not rival empirical hypotheses about the same question. They operate at a level of generality that no finite observation can either confirm or refute, and they are grounded in principles that modern physics itself depends on.

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## Four: Perception Works Through Particles in Contact

### The Core Claim

Epicurus's theory of perception — his account of how information about the external world reaches our senses — is often treated as one of the most outdated parts of his philosophy. The idea that objects continually shed thin films of atoms (eidōla, or images) that travel through space and interact with our sense organs seems to modern readers like naive speculation, far removed from what we know about light, sound, and neural processing.

But look again at what the claim actually is. Epicurus is asserting:

- That the information our senses receive about the external world reaches us through a physical process, not through divine communication, magical sympathy, or any mechanism that bypasses the material world.
- That this process involves something emanating from or interacting with objects and traveling through space to reach us.
- That our perception is a response to physical contact between what has traveled from the object and what constitutes our sense organs.

What Epicurus described is, in outline, exactly what modern physics confirms.

### The Modern Account

Light — the medium through which most of our information about the external world reaches us — consists of photons: discrete particles (or wave-packets of electromagnetic energy) that emanate from or are reflected by physical objects and travel through space until they interact with the photoreceptors of the eye. The photoreceptors are physical structures — proteins in the retina — that respond to photon contact by initiating electrochemical signals that travel to the brain.

Sound consists of pressure waves propagating through a medium — particles of air oscillating in patterns that carry information about the vibrating source, eventually interacting with the eardrum and hair cells of the cochlea. Touch is direct particle-to-particle contact. Smell and taste involve molecules — actual

particles shed by objects — traveling through air or dissolved in saliva to interact with chemoreceptors.

Across all the senses, what moves from the world to us is always physical, always particulate, always contact. The names have changed — Epicurus called them eidōla; we call them photons, phonons, odorant molecules — and the neural mechanisms were entirely unknown to him. But the foundational claim, that perception is a material process in which something physical travels from object to perceiver and makes contact with the sense organs, is not a pre-scientific guess that physics has superseded. It is what physics tells us.

The most important thing Epicurus established with the image theory was not any specific detail about how images are shed or how fast they travel. It was the categorical claim: perception does not require anything beyond matter and contact. There is no magical connection between mind and world that bypasses the physical. There is no divine intermediary delivering perceptions to us. What we know about the world, we know through material processes — particles interacting with particles, organized by the structures of our sense organs and processed by our minds.

That categorical claim is the bedrock of natural science. It is what makes the scientific investigation of perception possible. And it is what Epicurus established as a philosophical principle more than three centuries before the Christian era.

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## Five: Gods Are Blessed and Imperishable

### What Epicurus Actually Claimed

The Epicurean treatment of gods is the point on which Epicurus has been most thoroughly misread, both in antiquity and in the modern period. The misreading tends in opposite directions. Theological critics have accused him of atheism in disguise — of positing gods so remote and uninvolved that the label is meaningless. Modern scholars sympathetic to atheism have sometimes suggested that the Epicurean gods are a philosophical fiction, a concession to popular piety that Epicurus did not mean literally.

Both readings are wrong. What Epicurus actually claimed is considerably more precise than either acknowledges.

Epicurus's substantive claims about gods reduce to two: they are blessed (*makarios*), and they are imperishable (*aphthartos*). Everything else — the popular mythology about gods intervening in human affairs, rewarding devotion, punishing transgression, managing weather and war and disease — he rejected as false opinions, to be eliminated by the same application of reason and observation that eliminates all false opinions.

### How These Conceptions Are Formed

Norman DeWitt draws attention to how the conceptions of blessedness and imperishableness are established within Epicurean epistemology. They are not arbitrary theological assertions. They are concepts formed by the mind from patterns in experience, processed through the faculty of anticipations (*prolepseis*) that identifies recurring structures in what sensation delivers.

The concept of "blessedness" — of a life entirely characterized by pleasure and entirely free from pain and disturbance — is a concept we can form because we understand what pleasure is, what pain is, and what it would mean to have one without any admixture of the other. The concept of "imperishableness" — of a condition that persists without dissolution, that is not subject to the deterioration that ends all things we directly observe — is a concept we can form by reflection on the contrast between the changing, mortal things of our experience and the possibility of a condition without such change.

These are real patterns grounded in experience, not arbitrary theological assertions, and the typical errors about the gods consist in applying to beings described as blessed and imperishable the very characteristics — anger, favoritism, need, reaction to human behavior — that make blessedness impossible. A truly blessed being needs nothing from us, is disturbed by nothing we do, and has no motive to intervene in our affairs in response to our prayers or failures. A being with such needs and reactions is not blessed in the Epicurean sense.

### The DeWitt Point: Imperishable Through Action, Not By Nature

DeWitt argues for a further point that is usually overlooked. Epicurus does not describe gods as immortal by necessity, as if their continued existence were guar-

anteed by some intrinsic property of their nature that places them beyond all risk. The word he uses — *aphthartos*, imperishable — describes what they are, not a metaphysical necessity about what they must be regardless of circumstances.

A being that is imperishable by nature — that cannot under any conceivable circumstances cease to exist — is a being whose existence requires no explanation and whose condition involves no achievement. Such a being is very close to the supernatural, self-subsisting absolute of theological tradition, and Epicurus was working precisely against that tradition.

A being that is imperishable through its manner of living — that has achieved and maintains a condition of blessedness and permanence through wisdom about how to preserve its existence — is a different kind of being entirely. Its existence is entirely consistent with Epicurean physics: it is a compound of a particular kind, maintaining itself in a particular way. Its blessedness is a real achievement, not an intrinsic necessity. And the model it provides is genuinely instructive for human life, because the question of how to maintain the best possible condition in a world that is not organized around our preferences is exactly the question Epicurean ethics addresses.

This reading gives Epicurean theology a coherence that neither the "atheism in disguise" reading nor the "concession to piety" reading can achieve. The gods are real beings whose condition — blessed, stable, undisturbed — is what Epicurean philosophy aims to approximate for human beings to the greatest extent their nature permits. They are not objects of worship or supplication. They are exemplars of what it means to live in accordance with the principles of pleasure and nature, at a level of achievement and permanence we can approach but cannot fully replicate.

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## Conclusion: The Logical Framework Stands

What these five claims share is that none is an empirical prediction — a specific, falsifiable forecast about what some future measurement will find. Each is a lo-

gical claim about what any coherent account of the observable world must include:

- Division of matter cannot proceed to infinity, or finite things would dissolve.
- Both matter and space must be infinite, or the universe would be either packed solid or perpetually dispersing.
- The universe as a whole cannot have begun from nothing or end in nothing, or the principle that makes science intelligible would be false.
- Perception must work through material processes of contact, or knowledge of the external world is impossible in principle.
- What we call gods must be blessed and imperishable, and cannot coherently be assigned the needy, reactive properties of anthropomorphic mythology.

These are the presuppositions within which any science operates — not claims that better data can overturn. The history of physics — from the successive discoveries of atomic structure, to the conservation laws, to the particle nature of light, to the cosmological observations that leave the infinite extent of the universe open — has confirmed rather than undermined the logical framework Epicurus constructed.

What science has done is fill in details Epicurus left open — deliberately open, as he made clear was appropriate for questions that available evidence could not settle. The framework remains. The guardrails hold. The philosophical work Epicurus accomplished in establishing what must be true of any naturalist account of the world is as sound as it was when he first set it out more than two thousand years ago.

The critics who dismiss Epicurean physics as obsolete have mistaken the framework for the details. The details were always provisional. The framework was always the point.

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# Part Three: Divinity

# Epicurean Responses To The Intelligent Design Argument

## Introduction: A Very Old Argument

The intelligent design argument is one of the oldest and most persistent claims in the history of human thought. In its simplest form it says: the world we observe is too complex, too orderly, and too well-fitted to human life to have arisen without purpose. Something designed it. Something ordered it. Something or someone stands behind the apparent organization of nature and is responsible for that organization existing. Whether that something is called God, the Logos, the Demiurge, Providence, the First Cause, or simply Intelligence, the argument moves in the same direction: from the observable order of nature to an unobservable ordering mind that produced it.

This argument is not primarily the property of modern creationism or modern theology, though it has been absorbed into both. It is a philosophical argument with deep roots in Greek philosophy, and it was taken seriously by some of the most rigorous thinkers the ancient world produced: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics each gave it their own form, and each found in it a foundation for conclusions they considered essential. Plato used it to ground his account of the eternal Forms. Aristotle used it to establish the necessity of an unmoved mover at the foundation of all motion. The Stoics used it to build an entire theology of cosmic providence, divine law, and human obligation. By the time Epicurus was teaching in Athens in the early third century BC, the argument from design was not merely a theological opinion but a philosophical cornerstone on which competing schools had built enormous structures of ethics, politics, and cosmology.

Epicurus rejected it. He rejected it completely, on multiple grounds simultaneously, and with a clarity and force that his opponents found infuriating. His rejection was not the dismissal of a man who had not understood the argument; it was the systematic refutation of a man who had understood it better than most of those who accepted it – who had seen through its apparent logic to the errors beneath it, and who had grasped, with a precision that the centuries since have largely confirmed, why accepting it led not just to a false picture of the universe but to unnecessary human suffering.

This article traces the history of the argument from its earliest Greek forms, examines how each major philosophical school developed it, and then analyzes in detail the multiple grounds on which Epicurus rejected it: logical, canonical, physical, and ethical. It closes by examining why the Epicurean response remains as urgent and as necessary as it was when Epicurus first delivered it.



## Part One: The Intelligent Design Argument in Pre-Socratic Philosophy

### The Problem the Pre-Socratics Were Solving

The Pre-Socratic philosophers of the sixth and fifth centuries BC were engaged in what we might call the first sustained attempt to explain the natural world without constant reference to the specific interventions of the gods of Greek religion. Their project was not atheism in the modern sense; most of them believed in divine forces of some kind. But they were trying to move beyond the explanation that Zeus threw the thunderbolt, that Poseidon stirred the sea, that divine whim governed the movements of the stars. They wanted to find principles – *archai*, beginnings or foundations – from which the order of nature could be explained in general terms.

What they discovered, or thought they discovered, was that the closer you looked at the natural world, the more ordered and structured it appeared. The stars followed regular paths. The seasons returned in their cycle. Living creatures had organs that served their apparent functions with remarkable precision. The world

was not random chaos; it was a *cosmos* – a word that meant both "world" and "order" – and the question was what produced that order.

For many of the Pre-Socratics, the answer that presented itself was that order required an ordering principle – something intelligent, purposive, and directive that was responsible for the cosmos being ordered rather than chaotic. This was the birth of the intelligent design argument in Western philosophy.

**Anaxagoras and the Nous**

The clearest and most philosophically developed Pre-Socratic version of the intelligent design argument belongs to Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (c. 500–428 BC), who proposed that the ordering principle of the universe is *Nous* – Mind or Intelligence. In a famous passage preserved by later writers, Anaxagoras described Nous as follows:

Mind (*Nous*) is infinite and self-ruling, and is mixed with no thing, but is alone itself by itself. If it were not by itself, but were mixed with anything else, it would partake of all things... But Nous has power over all things that have soul, the greater and the smaller... Nous set in order all things that were to be, and all things that were and are now and that will be.

This is recognizable as an early version of the intelligent design argument. The universe is ordered; order requires a mind to impose it; therefore there is a mind that ordered the universe. Anaxagoras was celebrated in antiquity for this proposal, and Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* describes his own excitement when he first heard of it: here at last was a philosopher who explained the world by reference to Mind rather than by purely mechanical causes. If Mind orders all things, then everything is arranged for the best, and to understand why anything is as it is, one must ask what purpose Mind had in arranging it that way.

Socrates's excitement, as he famously reports it in the *Phaedo*, turned to disappointment when he read Anaxagoras more carefully and found that after introducing Nous as the ordering principle, Anaxagoras proceeded to explain individual phenomena by purely physical causes – air, water, fire, and their interactions – without ever actually using Nous to explain why things are as they are rather than otherwise. The Nous turned out to be a machine operator who started the machinery but then stepped back and let it run on mechanical principles.

Socrates considered this a failure. If Mind orders the cosmos, it should be possible to explain everything by reference to what Mind intended, not by reference to mere physical mechanism. The intelligent design argument, for Socrates, had to be pursued all the way down or it was not worth having.

### Diogenes of Apollonia

A slightly later Pre-Socratic, Diogenes of Apollonia (fl. c. 440 BC), took the argument further by identifying the intelligent ordering principle with a specific physical substance: air. For Diogenes, the air that pervades and constitutes all things is itself intelligent and divine, and its intelligence is evident in the orderly arrangement of the cosmos. He argued that the precise regulation of the seasons, the orderly motions of the heavenly bodies, and the overall arrangement of the world could not have come about without intelligence – and since air is what all things are made of and what drives all natural processes, air must be that intelligence.

The argument is important less for its specific content than for the form it establishes. Diogenes is arguing from the appearance of order and purpose in nature to the conclusion that an intelligent cause must be responsible for it, and he is identifying that intelligent cause with a natural substance that pervades and organizes all things. This pattern – order implies intelligence, intelligence is a natural pervading principle, therefore nature is intelligently ordered – becomes the template for the Stoic argument from design that Epicurus would later confront in its most developed form.

### The Significance of the Pre-Socratic Move

What the Pre-Socratics established, in varying ways, was that the appearance of order in nature creates a philosophical problem that seems to demand a solution in terms of some ordering intelligence. The world looks designed. It looks purposeful. Its parts seem fitted to their functions. Its regularities seem too consistent to be accidental. The Pre-Socratic move was to take this appearance seriously as evidence of an actual ordering cause – and to argue that any adequate account of nature must include such a cause.

Epicurus's eventual rejection of this move begins here, with the question of whether the appearance of order and purpose in nature actually requires an or-

dering mind to explain it, or whether natural processes can produce order without any purposive direction. But before Epicurus could make that argument, the intelligent design position had been enormously strengthened and elaborated by the three most influential philosophers between the Pre-Socratics and the Hellenistic period: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

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## Part Two: The Intelligent Design Argument in Socrates and Plato

### Socrates: The Argument from Function

Socrates, as recorded by Xenophon in the *Memorabilia*, developed what is perhaps the most direct and intuitively accessible form of the intelligent design argument in all of ancient philosophy. It is the argument from the precise fitness of organs to their apparent functions – what we would now call the argument from biological design.

Socrates walks his interlocutor through a series of examples. The eyelid was made to protect the eye – it closes when something threatens and opens to allow vision, and its lashes serve as a fence to prevent small particles from entering while allowing sight. The eyebrow was placed where it is to divert sweat from the forehead so that it does not run into the eyes. The mouth is positioned directly below the nose so that pleasant smells can be appreciated while eating. The nostrils point downward rather than upward so that rain does not collect in them. The teeth are arranged so that the front teeth cut food and the back teeth grind it. In every case, Socrates argues, the arrangement is precisely what a thoughtful craftsman would have specified if designing the organism from scratch.

His conclusion is blunt: it is impossible that such precise and mutually coordinated arrangements arose without intelligent purpose. Nature did not stumble into the arrangement by accident. Something designed it – something that had the welfare of living creatures in view and arranged the parts of their bodies accordingly.

> *"Viewed in this light they would seem to be the handiwork of some wise artificer, full of love for all things living."*[1] *"What shall we say of this passion implanted*

> *in man to beget offspring, this passion in the mother to rear her babe, and in the creature itself, once born, this deep desire of life and fear of death?"*[2] *"No doubt these do look like the contrivances of some one deliberately planning the existence of living creatures."*[3] – Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I.4.7

This is the teleological argument in its most human and emotionally compelling form. The world looks like it was made for us. Our bodies are arranged precisely to serve our needs. Our feelings are calibrated to motivate behaviors that serve our survival and flourishing. How could this be accidental? The only adequate explanation, Socrates insists, is a wise and benevolent designer.

### Plato: The Demiurge and the Timaeus

Plato took the Socratic argument and built it into a full cosmological account in the *Timaeus*, which is the most elaborate and influential ancient statement of the intelligent design position. The *Timaeus* presents a creation account in which the universe was fashioned by a divine craftsman – the Demiurge, which means "craftsman" or "maker" – who imposed order on a pre-existing chaotic matter by using the eternal Forms as his model.

The Demiurge, in Plato's account, is good, and being good he desired that everything should be as good as possible. Finding the visible universe in a state of disorder, he brought it into order, on the principle that order is always better than disorder. He fashioned the cosmos as a living creature with intelligence, modeled on the eternal living creature that exists in the realm of Forms. He created the heavenly bodies and set them on their circular paths, because circular motion is the most perfect. He created human beings, giving each a rational soul – a fragment of the world soul – housed in a round head, because the sphere is the most perfect shape.

For Plato, the intelligent design argument is not merely an argument from the appearance of biological function. It is grounded in a comprehensive metaphysical picture. The world is ordered because it was made by a good craftsman who used a perfect model. The order we observe in nature is the imprint of mathematical perfection – of the eternal Forms – on matter. To understand why the world is as it is, one must ultimately look to the Forms and to the Good that drives the Demiurge to realize them in matter as faithfully as possible.

The *Timaeus* also contains Plato's most developed statement of the teleological analysis of the human body, following directly in the tradition of Socrates. The eyes were fashioned by the gods to give us sight so that we could observe the orderly motions of the heavens and, by reasoning about those motions, attune our souls to the cosmic order. The head is round because the soul within it needs to be able to rotate in the perfect circles of rational thought. Every part of the human body is explained by reference to the purpose the gods had in creating it.

### Plato's Phaedo and the Argument from Order

In the *Phaedo*, Plato records Socrates's own retrospective account of his philosophical development, including his disappointment with Anaxagoras discussed above. The point Socrates makes against Anaxagoras – that if Mind orders all things, then every explanation of why things are as they are should be a purposive explanation – becomes in the *Phaedo* the basis of a positive philosophical method. If you want to understand why any natural thing is as it is, you should ask what is best – what purpose a wise ordering intelligence would have had in arranging things that way. The physical mechanism that realizes the purpose is secondary; the purpose itself is the real explanation.

This methodological commitment is philosophically profound and practically devastating. It means that the natural scientist who traces causal mechanisms – who explains the eye by reference to the optical properties of the lens and the retina rather than by reference to the gods' intention that we should see – has given an incomplete and ultimately shallow explanation. The real explanation is always the purposive one: the gods arranged it this way because it is better this way. Mechanism describes how. Purpose explains why. And for Plato, the why is always primary.

Epicurus's later insistence on giving purely mechanical causal explanations of all natural phenomena – without any appeal to purpose, design, or the intentions of a designer – is a direct and deliberate rejection of this Platonic methodological commitment. The conflict between the two positions is not peripheral. It goes to the heart of what counts as an adequate explanation of nature.

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## Part Three: Aristotle Abandons the Forms but Keeps the Design

### The Departure from Plato

Aristotle agreed with his teacher Plato on a great deal but broke sharply with him on the question of the eternal Forms. Plato had held that the Forms – the eternal, perfect archetypes of everything – exist in a separate realm outside the physical world, and that the Demiurge used them as models in fashioning the cosmos. Aristotle rejected this. Eternal abstract Forms existing in a separate non-physical realm were, in Aristotle's view, an unnecessary and philosophically problematic duplication. The form of a horse does not exist somewhere outside all horses; it is present in actual horses as the principle that makes them what they are. Forms are not transcendent but immanent – they exist in things, not above them.

This was a significant departure. But Aristotle made a move that preserved the essential structure of the intelligent design argument even while abandoning its Platonic foundation: he retained teleology – the claim that natural things have purposes – as an irreducible feature of nature itself. Nature does not need an external designer because nature itself acts purposively, directing the development of each thing toward its proper end.

### The Four Causes and Final Causation

Aristotle's analysis of causation, developed most fully in the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*, distinguishes four types of cause: material (what something is made of), formal (what kind of thing it is), efficient (what produced it), and final (what it is for). All four are required for a complete explanation of any natural thing or process.

The final cause – the purpose or end that a thing is directed toward – is for Aristotle often the most important of the four. In natural organisms, the final cause is the full development and flourishing of the creature. The acorn's final cause is the oak tree it will become; the embryo's final cause is the adult animal. All the changes and processes involved in growth and development are directed by

nature toward this end. Nature acts, in Aristotle's famous formulation, "for the sake of something."[4]

This principle is stated most clearly in the *Physics*:

> *"Now surely as in intelligent action, so in nature; and as in nature, so it is in each action, if nothing interferes. Now intelligent action is for the sake of an end; therefore the nature of things also is so. ... If, therefore, artificial products are for the sake of an end, so clearly also are natural products."*[5] – Aristotle, *Physics* II.8, 199a

Nature does not make things in vain. Every organ, every structure, every natural process has a purpose that is part of the explanation of why it is as it is. The eye is for seeing; the heart is for distributing blood; the teeth are for processing food. These are not merely descriptions of what these organs happen to do; they are explanations of why the organs are as they are. Nature arranged them this way because this arrangement serves the creature's flourishing.

### The Unmoved Mover

At the cosmological level, Aristotle's teleological picture culminates in the doctrine of the Unmoved Mover – the ultimate source of motion and change in the universe. In *Physics* Book VIII and *Metaphysics* Book XII, Aristotle argues that the chain of movers and moved things must have a first mover that is itself not moved by anything else. This first mover must be eternal, unchanging, and purely actual – containing no potentiality that could be actualized by a further cause.

The Unmoved Mover moves everything else not by pushing or pulling – not by any physical interaction – but by being the object of desire and thought: it is the highest good, and everything in the universe tends toward it as toward its ultimate end. The circular motions of the heavenly spheres, which are the most perfect natural motions, are explained by the desire of the heavenly intelligences to imitate, as nearly as a physical thing can, the perfect eternal actuality of the Unmoved Mover.

The Unmoved Mover is not a creator – it did not make the world out of nothing or impose order on chaos. Aristotle's universe is eternal and uncreated. But the Unmoved Mover is responsible for the orderly, purposive character of everything

in the universe, drawing all things toward their natural ends through the power of its perfection. This is intelligent design without a designer in the Platonic sense, but it preserves the core of the argument: the order and purposiveness of nature are not self-explanatory; they require a reference to something that is by its nature the source of order and purpose.

### Why Aristotle Matters for the Epicurean Debate

Aristotle's development of the intelligent design argument is important for understanding Epicurus for two reasons. First, Aristotle systematized the teleological analysis of nature to a degree that made it seem almost irresistible – after reading the *Parts of Animals* and the *History of Animals*, it can seem genuinely difficult to imagine how anything so precisely and economically organized as a living creature could have come about without purposive direction. Second, Aristotle provided philosophical tools that the Stoics would use to build the most elaborate and direct version of the intelligent design argument that Epicurus's school would have to confront.



## Part Four: Intelligent Design as the Foundation of Stoicism

### The Stoic Cosmos

The Stoics, founding their school in Athens shortly after Epicurus founded his Garden, built the intelligent design argument into the very foundation of their philosophy. For the Stoics, the universe is not merely orderly – it is the living body of a divine rational being, suffused throughout by a divine breath or spirit (*pneuma*) identified with reason (*logos*) and with fire. This divine reason is the principle of all order, all structure, and all purpose in the cosmos. It is providence (*pronoia*) – literally "forethought" – the intelligence that directs all things toward their proper ends.

The Stoic philosophical system is, from its foundations to its conclusions, an expression of this central conviction. Their physics explains how the divine logos organizes matter. Their logic develops the rational principles that mirror the logos of the cosmos. Their ethics derives the principles of right living from the requirements of living in accordance with the divine rational nature of the uni-

verse. Intelligent design, for the Stoics, is not a corner of their philosophy – it is its center.

### The Argument from Design in Cicero's Stoic Spokesman

The most fully developed ancient statement of the Stoic intelligent design argument is preserved in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, where the Stoic position is presented by a character named Balbus in Book II. This text is important not only for the arguments it contains but because it states the position that the Epicurean spokesman Velleius attacks in Book I of the same work, where he takes on Plato's *Timaeus* and the Stoic doctrine of providence side by side, as two versions of the same claim that a divine mind made and governs the world.

Balbus's argument moves through several distinct phases, each of which represents a distinct form of the intelligent design position:

The **argument from cosmic order**: The regular motions of the heavenly bodies – the precise periodicities of the sun, moon, and planets, the unchanging patterns of the stars – are too consistent and too mathematically precise to be the result of chance collision of atoms. They require a rational organizing principle. As Balbus puts it: when you see a sundial or a water-clock, you understand that the device was made by an intelligent craftsman, not assembled by chance. The cosmos, whose regularities dwarf any human clockwork, must equally have been ordered by a craftsman – and a craftsman of vastly superior intelligence.

The **argument from biological function**: Following directly in the tradition of Socrates and the Platonic *Timaeus*, Balbus catalogs the precise fitness of animal organs to their functions. The Stoic version of this argument is developed at exhaustive length and includes not only the obvious cases (eyes for seeing, ears for hearing) but detailed discussions of the arrangement of the internal organs, the structure of the digestive and reproductive systems, the coordination of different sensory and motor systems, and the overall economy of the living body. The argument is that such precise and multi-layered coordination cannot be the result of undirected physical processes.

The **argument from the scale of the provision**: The Stoics argued not merely that organisms are well-designed but that the entire natural world is arranged for the benefit of rational beings – above all, for human beings. The earth produces

food; the animals are provided for human use; the climate is suitable for human habitation; the heavenly bodies serve as navigation aids. This is the ancient version of what modern theologians call the anthropic argument: the world is fine-tuned for life, and in particular for intelligent life. This cannot be accidental.

The **argument from the nature of mind**: If the universe produces minds – beings capable of rational thought, of understanding mathematical relationships, of grasping the order of the cosmos – then the universe must itself contain something of the nature of mind. A mindless universe cannot explain how it came to produce mindedness. Therefore the universe is itself, at its deepest level, something like a mind – or is the expression of a mind that stands behind it.

Together these arguments constitute what is probably the most formidable ancient statement of the intelligent design position. They are well-constructed, they are philosophically serious, and they draw on several different lines of evidence that seem, at first encounter, to point in the same direction.

## The Ethical and Political Consequences

For the Stoics, the intelligent design argument was not merely a metaphysical curiosity. It had direct and far-reaching ethical and political implications. If the universe is the expression of a divine rational providence, then:

Natural law – the moral law that applies to all rational beings – is grounded in the rational nature of the divine cosmos and is therefore absolute, universal, and binding on everyone regardless of their personal desires or cultural background. Human laws that conform to natural law are legitimate; those that conflict with it are not.

Fate – the chain of causes determined by the divine logos – governs all events, including all human choices and actions. The wise Stoic accepts this fate as the expression of divine reason and works within it rather than chafing against it.

The gods take an interest in human affairs: since the divine logos is the ordering principle of the cosmos and cares for the cosmos's rational creatures, prayer, divination, and piety have genuine effects. The gods reward those who live in accordance with the logos and are, at least in principle, available to human petition.

Virtue – living in accordance with reason – is both the highest good and a participation in the divine rational nature of the cosmos. The virtuous Stoic is, in a meaningful sense, living as the gods live. Pleasure, as a merely sensory response to circumstances, is irrelevant to this higher participation.

Every one of these consequences is directly and explicitly contested by Epicurus. PD1 denies that the gods take any interest in human affairs. PD2 denies that death holds anything to be feared. The Epicurean rejection of fate asserts genuine human freedom of choice. The Epicurean identification of pleasure as the highest good directly contradicts the Stoic claim that virtue is sufficient for happiness regardless of sensory experience. The intelligent design argument is not background music to the Epicurean-Stoic debate; it is the central point of contention from which all the other disagreements flow.



## Part Five: Epicurus Rejects Intelligent Design on Logical and Canonical Grounds

### The Canonical Standard Applied

The most fundamental Epicurean objection to the intelligent design argument is not a physical counterargument – it is a canonical one. The argument from design concludes that an unobservable intelligent cause is responsible for the observable order of nature. The canonical standard that Epicurus established as the foundation of all knowledge requires that any claim about what exists be answerable to the evidence of sensation and experience. Can the designing intelligence be perceived? Can its existence be confirmed by any observation? Can any test be specified that would distinguish a designed universe from an undesigned one?

The answers are no, no, and no. The designer in the intelligent design argument is, by the nature of the argument, something that stands outside the observed evidence – an inference to a cause that is not itself observed, justified on the grounds that no other cause could produce the observed effect. This is precisely the kind of move that the canonical standard is designed to block. As the companion article on Epicurean Canonics establishes, the canonical criterion does not merely require that claims be consistent with observation; it requires that

they be positively supported by observation and not merely compatible with it. A cause that cannot be distinguished from its absence by any possible observation has not met the canonical standard of evidence.

Velleius, Cicero's Epicurean spokesman in Book I of *On the Nature of the Gods*, makes exactly this point in his critique of the Stoic position:

> *"This is the god whom we should call happy in the proper sense of the term; your Stoic god seems to us to be grievously overworked. ... If on the other hand some god resides within the world as its governor and pilot, maintaining the courses of the stars, the changes of the seasons and all the ordered process of creation, and keeping a watch on land and sea to guard the interests and lives of men, why, what a bondage of irksome and laborious business is his!"*[6] – Velleius in Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I.52

The Epicurean point runs deeper than wit. The god of the intelligent design argument is postulated to explain observable order, but its attributes – its intelligence, its purposiveness, its eternal busy administration of the cosmos – are not derived from any observation. They are inferred from an assumed analogy between the cosmos and a human artifact. And that analogy is precisely what needs to be examined rather than assumed.

## The Regress Problem

The intelligent design argument in all its ancient forms faces a logical problem that the Epicureans pressed with particular force. If the order and complexity of the universe require an intelligent designer to explain them, then the intelligent designer – which must be more complex than the universe it designed, since it is capable of comprehending and ordering that universe – requires an explanation at least as much as the universe does. Where did the designer come from? Who or what ordered the intelligence that ordered everything else?

The Stoics attempted to answer this by making the divine logos self-existent and eternal. It was not created; it has always existed; it requires no external explanation. But the Epicureans pressed the obvious response: if the divine logos can be eternal and self-existent without requiring an external explanation, why cannot the universe itself be eternal and self-existent without requiring an external explanation? The appeal to a self-existing eternal designer simply moves the diffi-

culty one step back without resolving it. If the question "why is there order rather than chaos?" can be answered by positing an eternal self-ordering intelligence, then the question can equally well be answered by positing an eternal natural process that produces order without intelligence. The designer has done no explanatory work; it has merely inserted an additional entity between the question and the answer.

Lucretius states this argument succinctly in Book V of *De Rerum Natura*:

> *"But even if I knew not what are the first-beginnings of things, yet this I would dare to affirm from the very workings of heaven, and to prove from many other things as well, that by no means has the nature of things been fashioned for us by divine grace: so great are the flaws with which it stands beset."*[7] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V.195–199

The universe contains too much that is wasteful, hostile, and indifferent to life to be the product of a benevolent designer. This is the ancient statement of the problem of evil – a problem that, as Lucretius observes, does not afflict the Epicurean account at all, since the Epicurean universe is not the product of any intelligence and makes no claim to have been arranged for any being's benefit.

### The Argument from False Analogy

The intelligent design argument in all its forms rests on an analogy: the universe is like a complex artifact (a sundial, a ship, a city), and just as a complex artifact requires an intelligent maker, so does the universe. The Epicureans challenged this analogy at its foundation.

The analogy between the universe and a human artifact is based on the observation that both exhibit order and apparent purpose. But the observation that two things share one property does not establish that they share all properties – and in particular it does not establish that they share a causal history. We know that complex artifacts have intelligent makers because we have observed the process of making them. We have watched craftsmen work, we have seen ships built in shipyards, we have observed the transmission of technical knowledge from master to apprentice. Our inference that a complex artifact has an intelligent maker is grounded in this extensive observational background.

We have no analogous observational background for universes. We have never observed a universe being made. We have never seen what universes look like when they arise without intelligence and what they look like when they are designed. We have exactly one universe available for comparison, and no basis for determining, from that single case, whether it represents the designed or the undesigned variety. The analogy to human artifacts, therefore, gives us no real epistemic purchase. It presents the conclusion as if it followed from the analogy when in fact the analogy simply restates the assumption that design is the correct explanation – which is precisely what needs to be established.

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## Part Six: Epicurus Rejects Intelligent Design on Physical Grounds

### A Universe That Makes Itself

The Epicurean physical account of the cosmos provides the positive alternative to the intelligent design argument: a complete and coherent account of how ordered structures, including living organisms, can arise from the natural motion of atoms through void without any purposive direction. This account does not merely remove the designer; it shows in detail why no designer is needed.

The foundational principles are those established in Epicurus's *Letter to Herodotus* and developed at length by Lucretius. Atoms are eternal and indestructible. They move continuously through infinite void. Their shapes, sizes, and arrangements vary enormously. They collide, combine, and separate according to their physical properties. No single arrangement is inherently more probable than any other at the atomic level – all arrangements that are physically possible will occur, given infinite time and infinite space.

The crucial implication is that in an infinite universe with infinite time, every physically possible arrangement of atoms will occur – not once, but infinitely many times. This includes arrangements that are stable and that persist for long periods, and arrangements that are unstable and that quickly disperse. The universe we observe is one of the stable arrangements. It has persisted because its large-scale structure is stable. Other arrangements that were not stable have not

persisted and are not available for observation. The apparent uniqueness and improbability of the observed universe is therefore an artifact of the fact that only stable universes are available to be observed – not evidence that the universe was designed to be stable.

### The Proto-Selectionist Argument

One of the most striking features of Lucretius's development of Epicurean physics is the argument he presents in Book V of *De Rerum Natura* about the origin of living organisms. This argument has attracted attention from modern readers as an anticipation of natural selection – not in the full Darwinian sense, but in the logical structure that underlies it.

Lucretius argues that in the early history of the earth, the ground spontaneously produced all manner of organisms, many of them grotesque and non-viable – creatures without limbs, or with too many limbs, or with the wrong limbs in the wrong places, or without the organs needed for reproduction. Those creatures could not survive or reproduce, and they perished. What remained were the creatures whose natural endowments were sufficient for survival and reproduction. As Lucretius puts it:

> *"And many monsters too earth then essayed to create, born with strange faces and strange limbs, the man-woman, between the two, yet not either, sundered from both sexes, some things bereft of feet, or in turn robbed of hands, things too found dumb without mouths, or blind without eyes, or locked through the whole body by the clinging of the limbs, so that they could not do anything or move towards any side or avoid calamity or take what they needed. All other monsters and prodigies of this sort she would create; all in vain, since nature forbade their increase, nor could they reach the coveted bloom of age nor find food nor join in the work of Venus."*[8] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V.837–855

This passage is remarkable for what it implies. The organisms we observe are not the result of prior design specifying what an organism should be like. They are the survivors of a process in which all manner of configurations were tried and most failed. The appearance of precise fitness to function – the impression of design – is produced by this process of differential survival, not by intelligent anticipation of what would work. The eye is not purposively designed for seeing; it is simply the case that creatures without functional eyes were unable to survive

and reproduce, while those with them could. The design is retrospective, not prospective.

David Sedley, in his important study *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*, shows that Lucretius generally carries forward Epicurus's own arguments together with their original targets, and that the first target was Plato's *Timaeus*, as Plato's own school was reading it in Epicurus's day, before the Stoics had taken the field. Sedley also traces this survival passage back to Empedocles, whose account of the first living things Lucretius echoes. But in substance the target is the same one that readers today know best from the Stoics. The Stoics took over the Platonic conviction that the world is the work of a divine intelligence acting for the benefit of gods and men, and they differed from Plato mainly on the details of how the making took place. Plato and the Stoics stand in the same creationist camp, and an argument that answers one answers the other. The creationist argument says: the precise fit of organs to functions could only have been achieved by prior design. Lucretius answers: it could equally well have been produced by the survival of functional configurations and the elimination of non-functional ones, without any prior design at all.

## Lucretius on the Eye and the Rejection of Teleology

Lucretius makes the anti-teleological argument most explicit in Book IV, in a passage that directly challenges the claim that organs were made for their functions:

> *"nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but what is born creates its own use. Nor did sight exist before the light of the eyes was born, nor pleading in words before the tongue was created, but rather the birth of the tongue came long before speech ..."*[9] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* IV.834–837

This is a direct inversion of the Platonic and Stoic teleological principle. Eyes were not made in order to see; rather, having eyes enables seeing, and creatures with eyes that enabled them to navigate their environment survived to reproduce while others did not. The function is the result of the structure, not its cause. This reversal is at the heart of the Epicurean physical answer to the argument from design.

### The Imperfection of the World as Evidence Against Design

A recurring theme in Lucretius's treatment of the intelligent design question is the argument from imperfection: if the world were designed by a perfect or even a competent intelligence for the benefit of its inhabitants, it would not look like it does. Most of the earth's surface is uninhabitable – frozen, or arid, or covered by sea. Most of what grows in the wild is useless or poisonous to human beings. Disease is ubiquitous. Childhood mortality is savage. The most rational creature the universe has produced enters the world helpless and remains dependent for years, unlike the offspring of most other animals. None of this is what we would expect from a universe arranged by benevolent intelligence for the benefit of its rational inhabitants.

> *"First, of all that the huge expanse of heaven covers, half thereof mountains and forests of wild beasts have greedily seized; rocks possess it, and waste pools and the sea, which holds far apart the shores of the lands. Besides, two-thirds almost burning heat and the ceaseless fall of frost steal from mortals. Of all the field-land that remains, yet nature would by her force cover it up with thorns, were it not that the force of man resisted her ..."*[10] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V.200–210

This is not the world an intelligent designer arranged for the benefit of its inhabitants. It is the world you would expect from atoms moving through void under natural laws, with life arising wherever conditions happen to permit it and struggling to persist wherever conditions happen to be unfavorable. The imperfection of the world is not a puzzle for the Epicurean; it is exactly what the physical account predicts. It is a serious problem for the intelligent designer – one that the ancient proponents of the argument never adequately resolved.

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## Part Seven: Epicurus Condemns the Ethical Implications of Intelligent Design

### The Argument as a Mechanism of Control

Epicurus did not merely consider the intelligent design argument wrong. He considered it harmful – not accidentally harmful, as a mistake that happened to

have bad practical consequences, but systematically harmful in a way that was inseparable from its philosophical function. The argument was, and had been throughout its history, a philosophical instrument for establishing and maintaining the authority of those who claimed to speak for the divine ordering intelligence – and for imposing on ordinary human beings the fear, the guilt, and the submission that such authority requires.

Understanding this is essential for understanding why Epicurus attacked the intelligent design argument with such force and why he placed the refutation of divine providence at the very beginning of his list of *Principal Doctrines*. This was not a hobby-horse or a personal quirk. It was the philosophical recognition that the acceptance of intelligent design, with all its entailments, was among the chief sources of the unnecessary human suffering that Epicurean philosophy was designed to alleviate.

PD1 establishes that a truly blessed being has no trouble itself and creates none for others. This is not merely a theological proposition; it is the demolition of the mechanism by which the intelligent design argument was made practically effective. If the god who designed the universe is also the god who monitors human behavior, who rewards the pious and punishes the impious, who cares whether we honor him in the prescribed ways – then the intelligent design argument immediately generates a set of obligations and fears that make human life worse rather than better. The argument from design, in this form, is an argument for submission: the universe was designed for us, and in return we owe its designer service, worship, and obedience.

Epicurus saw this connection clearly and struck at it directly. The existence of a designing intelligence does not by itself establish any human obligation to it or fear of it – but the tradition of Greek and Roman religion, reinforced by the philosophical tradition from Anaxagoras through the Stoics, consistently moved from the claim of divine intelligence and care to the claim of divine demands and punishments. By establishing that any truly divine being is entirely unconcerned with human affairs, Epicurus severed this connection at its root.

## The Problem of Evil and the Character of the Designer

The intelligent design argument, as the ancient Epicureans recognized, also generates a moral problem that its proponents have never satisfactorily resolved: if the universe was designed by a powerful and intelligent being, and if that being had the welfare of its creatures in view, then the suffering visible throughout the natural world requires explanation. Why do children die of disease? Why does the capacity for pain exist in all the elaborateness it does – with the full range of physical suffering, with psychological anguish, with grief, with terror? Why does a world designed for its inhabitants contain so many efficient mechanisms for destroying those inhabitants?

The ancient version of this argument is most fully stated by Lucretius and by Velleius in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, but it goes back to Epicurus himself. The Epicurean formulation of what later philosophy would call "the problem of evil" is characteristically direct: either the designing god is unwilling to prevent evil, in which case he is not good, or he is unable to prevent it, in which case he is not powerful, or he is both willing and able, in which case the evil that manifestly exists is inexplicable. This is not a problem for the Epicurean physical account, in which suffering is the natural result of natural processes that have no concern for the welfare of any creature. It is a devastating problem for the intelligent design position.

## The Displacement of Pleasure as the Natural Guide

There is a further ethical consequence of the intelligent design argument that Epicurus found particularly objectionable, though it is less often noted. If the universe was designed by an intelligence that has purposes for its rational creatures – if the arrangement of the world is an expression of what the divine designer intended – then the natural guide of pleasure and pain, which Nature has given every creature to direct it toward what is good for it, is demoted from the status of the primary ethical standard to at best a secondary one.

On the intelligent design account, the proper guide for human action is not what we find pleasant or painful but what the designing intelligence intends for us. The Stoics were explicit about this: the right life is the life in accordance with nature and reason, which means the life in accordance with the rational principle of the cosmos – and this may require us to override or suppress the guidance of

pleasure and pain in the service of a higher rational principle. Indeed, the Stoic sage is supposed to be happy even on the rack: if he is living in accordance with the divine logos, his happiness is secured regardless of what he actually feels.

Epicurus found this position not merely philosophically wrong but morally perverse. Nature has given every living creature pleasure and pain as its guides for a reason: because pleasure is what is genuinely good for a living creature and pain is what is genuinely bad. An intelligent design account that overrides these natural guides with the supposed demands of a cosmic purpose is, in Epicurus's view, substituting an imaginary obligation for a real and natural one – and doing so in ways that cause genuine suffering in the name of an alleged higher good.

This is the deepest ethical objection to intelligent design from the Epicurean perspective. It is not primarily about the intellectual error of inferring an unobservable cause from an observable effect. It is about what happens to human beings when they accept the conclusion of that argument: they surrender the guidance of their own natural faculties to the demands of an alleged divine purpose, and they suffer as a result.

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## Part Eight: The Epicurean Rejection of Intelligent Design Remains Vital Today

### The Modern Forms of the Argument

The intelligent design argument did not retire when the ancient philosophical schools declined. It was absorbed into Christian theology, which added to the ancient philosophical arguments the resources of revealed scripture and institutional authority. It survived the scientific revolution by retreating from specific claims about the arrangement of the heavens and the earth to more general claims about the fine-tuning of the universe's fundamental constants. And it has returned in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in forms that are, in their essential philosophical structure, continuous with the arguments of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics.

The modern "intelligent design" movement, associated above all with biochemist Michael Behe and mathematician William Dembski, argues that certain biolo-

gical structures – Behe's example is the bacterial flagellum, a microscopic rotary motor – are "irreducibly complex" in the sense that they could not have been assembled by incremental natural selection because they cease to function if any of their components are removed. Therefore, the argument goes, they must have been designed as integrated wholes by an intelligent designer. This is the argument from biological function in a modern molecular-biological dress.

The fine-tuning argument, associated with physicists and cosmologists as well as with philosophers of religion, observes that the fundamental physical constants of the universe – the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the masses of fundamental particles, the strength of the electromagnetic force – appear to be precisely calibrated within very narrow ranges that permit the existence of stars, planets, and life. Small variations in any of these constants would produce a universe in which stars could not form or would burn out too quickly for planets to develop, or in which atomic nuclei could not form, or in which chemistry as we know it would be impossible. The probability of these constants all falling within the life-permitting range by chance, the argument goes, is so astronomically small that intelligent design provides a better explanation.

Both of these arguments are, at their philosophical core, versions of the ancient argument from design: the world appears designed; the appearance of design requires a designer; therefore there is a designer.

### The Epicurean Responses Still Apply

The Epicurean responses developed in Parts Five and Six of this article apply to the modern versions of the argument with no essential modification.

The canonical objection stands: the designer postulated by these arguments is not observed; its existence is inferred; and the inference is not supported by any evidence that distinguishes a designed universe from an undesigned one at the level of observation. The argument moves from the apparent improbability of the observed universe to the conclusion that it was designed – but improbability relative to what alternative? We have observed one universe. We have no basis for calculating the probability of the observed universe arising without design unless we have a well-established theory of how universes arise, which we do not.

The regress objection stands: if the fine-tuned universe requires an intelligent designer to explain it, the intelligent designer – capable of comprehending and instantiating the mathematical relationships governing a universe – is at least as complex as the universe and requires at least as much explanation.

The false analogy objection stands in its modern form as well. The argument from fine-tuning treats the physical constants as if they were like the adjustable parameters of a designed machine, set by a designer to achieve a specific result. But this analogy imports exactly the assumption at issue: that there is something like a designer choosing among possible settings. We do not know that the physical constants could have been different; we do not know that there are possible universes with different constants; we do not even know, at the deepest level of physics, whether the constants are genuinely independent variables or whether they are determined by a deeper unified theory.

The proto-selectionist argument has been spectacularly confirmed by Darwin's theory of natural selection, which provides in full detail exactly what Lucretius sketched in outline: a mechanism by which the appearance of precise biological design is produced by the differential survival and reproduction of heritable variations, without any prior purpose or intelligent direction. Behe's "irreducible complexity" argument has been answered both theoretically and empirically by evolutionary biologists who have traced the evolutionary pathways by which complex biological systems could have been assembled from simpler precursors, each conferring some advantage. The Epicurean logical point that the appearance of design does not require actual design has been given its most powerful vindication.

The fine-tuning argument has its own Epicurean-style answer in the multiverse hypothesis, which holds that our universe is one of an enormous or infinite number of universes, each with different physical constants. In such a framework, the existence of at least some universes with constants permitting life is expected rather than remarkable – and we are, of course, in one of those universes, because only universes that permit life contain observers to note the fact. This is the cosmological version of the same logical structure that underlies Lucretius's proto-selectionist argument: the apparent uniqueness and improbability of the

observed configuration is an artifact of observation selection, not evidence of design.

**The Ethical Dimension Remains Unchanged**

More important than the technical philosophical debates, from the Epicurean perspective, is the ethical dimension of the intelligent design argument – which remains exactly as it was in the ancient world.

The intelligent design argument, in all its modern forms, is still used to ground the same practical conclusions it was used to ground in antiquity: that we owe obligations to the designer, that our natural desires and impulses must be evaluated against the standard of the designer's intentions, that the natural guidance of pleasure and pain is insufficient or morally suspect without supplementation from the requirements of a higher purpose. Whether those conclusions are delivered through the institutions of religious authority, through the language of natural law, through the claim that human dignity is grounded in our status as created beings, or through the more diffuse cultural pressure of a civilization shaped by thousands of years of intelligent design theology, the practical effect on human beings is the same: the natural standard of pleasure and pain is subordinated to an alleged higher standard, and human beings are made to feel guilty, fearful, and obligated in ways that the Epicurean analysis identifies as unnecessary and harmful.

PD1 remains as necessary as it ever was. Any truly divine being – if such a being exists at all – is, precisely by virtue of its perfect blessedness, incapable of the jealousy, the demand for worship, the proneness to anger, and the appetite for punishment that the intelligent design tradition has consistently attributed to the designer. The god who designed the universe, if it exists, does not reward your devotion or punish your impiety. It does not care about your politics, your sexuality, your dietary practices, or your theological opinions. It is not available to be appeased or offended. Whatever designed the universe, if anything did, has not burdened you with any obligation. That burden is the invention of those who have found it useful to claim that it has.

### The Positive Epicurean Vision

It is worth ending not with refutation but with the positive vision that the Epicurean rejection of intelligent design makes possible. The universe that Epicurus describes – infinite in extent and eternal in time, governed throughout by natural laws that have no need of supernatural direction, populated by living beings who arose through natural processes and navigate their lives by the only guides Nature actually provided, pleasure and pain – is not a cold or diminished universe. It is the universe that actually exists, apprehended without the distortions of fear and false obligation that the intelligent design tradition has imposed on it.

In this universe, the pleasures of friendship, of intellectual understanding, of bodily health and enjoyment, of adventure and achievement, of the beauty of the natural world, are genuinely good – not because a designer intended them as rewards for correct behavior, but because they are what living creatures with our kind of nature find genuinely fulfilling. The fact that the universe did not arrange itself for our benefit does not make our lives less valuable; it makes the pleasures we actually find and secure more genuinely ours. We did not inherit them from a designer's generosity. We found them by living, and they are real.

As Lucretius wrote at the opening of his great poem – not as a prayer to a supernatural deity but as a hymn to the natural creative power of the world itself – the universe that atoms moving through void have produced, over the infinity of time, is one that contains all the richness of living things, all the variety of experience, and all the possibility of happiness. No designer was needed. What exists is enough.

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## Key Sources Referenced

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- Companion articles: "Epicurean Canonics – The World We Experience Is the Only Real World," "The Continued Vitality of Epicurean Physics," "Let All Who Would Free Themselves From the False Claims of the Geometers Enter Here," EpicurusToday.com


→ *Notes for this article*

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# The "Epicurean Paradox" Is Not Epicurean - An Excellent Article By Eikadistes

> "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

These lines appear on posters, in atheist debates, and all over the internet, nearly always with the name "Epicurus" attached. Most people who repeat them assume Epicurus was arguing that God does not exist. He was not.

Eikadistes has written an excellent treatment of this confusion: The "Epicurean Paradox" of the Skeptics. We recommend the original highly, since what follows covers only a few of its important points.

## Epicurus Said The Gods Exist

The starting point is Epicurus's own words. In the *Letter to Menoeceus* he tells his student to think of god as "a being immortal and blessed," and he states plainly: "For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision" (*Letter to Menoeceus* 123).[1] The impious man, Epicurus says, is not the one who rejects the gods of the crowd. It is the one who believes what the crowd says about the gods.

A man who writes this is not trying to prove that there are no gods. Whatever the riddle is, it cannot be Epicurus's argument for atheism.

## Where The Riddle Really Comes From

Eikadistes traces the riddle backward through three writers.

- **David Hume** made it famous in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779): "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered."
- **Lactantius**, the Christian writer of the early fourth century AD, is Hume's source. In *On the Anger of God* 13 he calls it "that argument of Epicurus."[2] Lactantius wrote nearly six hundred years after Epicurus and was openly hostile to him.
- **Sextus Empiricus**, the Pyrrhonist skeptic of the second century AD, gives the oldest surviving version (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3.9-11). He presents it as his own skeptical argument, not as Epicurus's.

Sextus uses arguments of this kind as tools of his skeptical method. His goal was to show that "we cannot apprehend whether God exists."[3] That is the opposite of Epicurus's position that knowledge of the gods is clear. Sextus spends much of the same chapter attacking Epicurean views of the gods. Eikadistes suggests that the argument may go back even further, to an Academic skeptic such as Carneades in the second century BC.

## Sextus Misunderstood The Epicurean Gods

Eikadistes shows that Sextus gets the Epicurean gods wrong in several ways:

- He treats them as idle and lacking energy. The Epicureans held that the gods lack nothing and live in complete happiness, enjoying each other's company.
- He claims that Epicurus made "the blessed" impossible to conceive. In fact Epicurus and Philodemus described blessedness in detail: a being that is free from want, never shares in pain, and is never bad-tempered (Philodemus, *On Piety*).
- He argues that because people disagree about what god is like, god cannot be clearly known. Epicurus held that the widespread human idea of a perfectly happy, imperishable being is itself evidence, even when the crowd adds false beliefs to it.

The basic difference is one of definition. For Sextus, god is unknowable. For Epicurus, the gods are natural beings, limited by nature like everything else. Eikadistes points out that they are not all-powerful, because nothing is greater than nature. They are not everywhere, because only the void is everywhere. They are not all-knowing, because no being in one place can know everything. What they have is complete self-sufficiency and constant happiness.

## What The Epicureans Did Argue

The modern use of the "riddle" to deny that any god exists is not Epicurean. But the Epicureans did argue from the evils and flaws of the world against **divine providence**, the claim that the gods made the world for us and govern it.

Lucretius says that "by no means has the nature of things been fashioned for us by divine grace: so great are the flaws with which it stands beset" (*On The Nature of Things* 5.195-199).[4] He asks who could control the whole universe and hurl thunderbolts that "often make havoc of his own temples" and that pass by the guilty and kill "the innocent and undeserving" (2.1090-1104).[5] Lactantius reports that Epicurus reasoned from the misfortunes of good men and the success of bad men to the conclusion that there is no providence (*Divine Institutes* 3.17).

Notice how Sextus's own version ends: "Therefore God has no forethought for the things in the universe."[6] That conclusion is Epicurean doctrine. The Epicureans agreed that the gods do not run the world. What they rejected was the next step that Sextus and Hume took: that because the gods do not run the world, we cannot know they exist, or that they do not exist at all.

So the finer point is this: The Epicureans used the existence of evil to show that the gods do not govern the world. They never used it to show that there are no gods. The skeptics, and later Hume, turned an argument against providence into an argument against divinity itself, and then attached Epicurus's name to it.

## Why This Matters

The false use of the "Epicurean Paradox" does real damage to those who are trying to understand Epicurus. It teaches people that Epicurus was an atheist who spent his time trying to disprove God. In fact Epicurus was a confident teacher

who held that the gods exist, that they are blessed and imperishable, that they do not punish or reward us, and that the right way to think of them is as models of the happiest possible life. Eikadistes's article sets the record straight, with the primary sources laid out in order. Read it in full at The "Epicurean Paradox" of the Skeptics.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Part Four: Canonics

# Epicurean Canonics - The World We Experience Is the Only Real World

## Sources

- *This document has been prepared under the direction and editorial supervision of Cassius Amicus using ClaudeAI and other assistance. It is based primarily on the analysis cited from the following source materials, supplement by other sources referenced within the text. Revisions are ongoing based on input received from EpicureanFriends.com.*
- P. and E. De Lacy, *Philodemus: On Methods of Inference* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1978[2]). Includes Greek text, facing English translation, critical notes, and five Supplementary Essays.
- David Sedley, "On Signs," in Barnes, Brunschwig, Burnyeat, and Schofield (eds.), *Science and Speculation: Studies in Hellenistic Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 239–272.
- David Sedley, "Epicurean Theories of Knowledge from Hermarchus to Lucretius and Philodemus," *Lexicon Philosophicum: International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas*, Special Issue (2018), pp. 105–121.[1] This paper traces the development of Epicurean theory of knowledge from Epicurus' death in 270 BCE through the first century BCE, examining the school's elaboration of inferential methodology in response first to Academic scepticism and later to Stoic rationalism.
- David Sedley, "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism," in Jonathan Barnes and Mario Mignucci (eds.), *Matter and Metaphysics: Fourth Symposium Hellenisticum* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1988), pp. 295–327. This paper argues that Epi-

curus, unlike Democritus, was a deliberate anti-reductionist: phenomenal properties, including sensory qualities, mental states, pleasure, and volition, are genuinely real at the phenomenal level and are not reducible to or eliminable in favor of atomic-level descriptions. This position has fundamental implications for the validity of empirical knowledge.

- David Sedley, "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism," in *Syzētēsis: Studi sull'epicureismo greco e romano offerti a Marcello Gigante* (Naples: Gaetano Macchiaroli, 1983), pp. 11–51. This paper presents and analyzes Epicurus' own argument against mechanistic determinism from *On Nature* Book XXXV (PHerc. 697, 1056, 1191), showing that the refutation is grounded in a non-reductionist psychology, an empiricist theory of knowledge, and the self-undermining character of any theory that would eliminate the autonomous self as a genuine causal factor.

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## WHAT IS CANONICS – AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

### The Branch of Philosophy That Comes First

Epicurus divided his philosophy into three parts. **Physics** addresses the nature of the world – what exists, what it is made of, how it works. **Ethics** addresses how to live – what brings genuine happiness, what we should pursue and avoid. But before either of these can get off the ground, there is a prior question: *How do we know anything at all?* What are the reliable sources of information about reality? How do we tell genuine knowledge from mere opinion or illusion? This is the question that **Canonics** addresses.

The name comes from the Greek word *kanōn* – a measuring rod or rule, a standard against which things can be checked. Epicurus wrote a work called *The Canon*, now lost, in which he laid out his theory of knowledge systematically. That work was held in such reverence by later Epicureans that they gave it the extravagant title "heaven-sent." Canonics was, for Epicurus, the foundation on which everything else stood.

He placed it first deliberately. You cannot say anything reliable about the world, or about how to live in it, until you have settled the question of *how* reliable

knowledge is possible. Get that wrong and everything built on top of it will be built on sand. And the Epicurean judgment was that most of the philosophical tradition around them – and before them – had got it catastrophically wrong.

### The Three Criteria of Truth

Epicurus' answer to the question "how do we know?" was that there are **three and only three reliable sources of genuine knowledge:**

**Sensation (*aisthēsis*)** – what our senses actually present to us. Not our interpretations of what we sense, not our judgments about it, but the raw deliverances of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Epicurus held that every sensation, considered purely as a sensation, is true: it reports faithfully what is actually acting on the sense organ. Error arises only when we add opinion to what the senses present – when we misinterpret or over-interpret what they give us.

**Preconception (*prolēpsis*)** – the general concepts we form by accumulating many experiences of the same kind of thing. When you have seen enough men that you could recognize a previously unseen man as a man, you have a preconception of "man." These preconceptions are built up from experience and serve as the background against which new experiences are interpreted. They are not innate Platonic Ideas; they are the product of lived experience, refined by repeated contact with the world.

**Feeling (*pathos*)** – the direct experience of pleasure and pain. These are the Epicurean guides for practical life, but they are also knowledge: the experience of pleasure tells you reliably that something is genuinely pleasant; the experience of pain tells you reliably that something is genuinely painful. These are not judgments that can be wrong; they are direct contacts with how things actually affect us.

Everything else we know – or claim to know – must ultimately trace back to these three sources. Any claim that cannot be connected back to sensation, preconception, or feeling is empty: a word without a referent, a philosophy without a foundation.

## Why This Is a Radical Claim

To appreciate the force of Epicurean Canonics, it helps to see what it was arguing against. The dominant tradition in ancient philosophy – running from Pythagoras through Plato and into much of later thought – held that the world presented to the senses was not the real world. It was changeable, relative, imperfect – and therefore, by these philosophers' standards, not fully knowable. Genuine knowledge required access to something permanent, universal, and exact: mathematical forms, eternal Ideas, pure rational essences. The philosopher who achieved real knowledge had in some sense transcended the ordinary world of experience and reached a "truer" world behind it.

On this view, most people, stuck with their senses and their feelings, live in a kind of twilight of mere opinion (*doxa*) rather than genuine knowledge (*epistēmē*). The senses actually mislead: they show us things as coloured and warm and beautiful, when the "real" atomic world has none of these properties. They show us a world of stable objects, when the "real" world is one of constant atomic flux. Sense experience, on this picture, is the problem – not the solution.

Epicurus rejected this root and branch. His Canonics is the systematic argument that **the world we encounter through sensation and feeling is genuinely real and genuinely knowable** – that the senses do not fundamentally mislead us, that the knowledge we build up from experience is real knowledge (not merely useful opinion), and that there is no hidden "true world" behind the one we live in that is more real than the one we experience directly. The present document traces that argument from its foundations in the Canon, through its development by Epicurus' followers over the following two centuries, to its deepest implications for our understanding of the world and our place in it.

A note on language: "Canonics" is the only technical term from Epicurean philosophy that gives the title of this document. Technical terms from ancient Greek are used throughout where they are the proper names of specific Epicurean or Stoic concepts, and all such terms are explained when first introduced. The analytical discussion otherwise aims to use straightforward language rather than the specialist vocabulary of academic philosophy. Where scholars writing about these topics use terms like "epistemology," "ontology," or "metaphysics," what they mean is, respectively, "theory of knowledge," "the question of what

exists," and "the study of what reality fundamentally is" – and this document generally uses those plain descriptions rather than the technical labels.[2]

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## PRELIMINARY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF EPICUREAN CANONICS AFTER EPICURUS

### The Problem of School Loyalty and Doctrinal Development

Any reading of Philodemus' *De Signis* must be placed within the broader history of how the Epicurean school handled the tension between slavish loyalty to the founder and the practical necessity of developing his positions in response to new philosophical challenges. This historical framing is provided by Sedley (2018) in essential detail.

When Epicurus died in 270 BCE, the school's attitude toward his writings underwent a fundamental transformation. During his lifetime, philosophical debate among his circle had been relatively open; there is evidence of at least limited disagreements between Epicurus and senior members of his inner circle, and some questions will have remained unsettled. But after the founder's death, his written doctrines acquired canonical status – as did, on the somewhat idealistic assumption that unanimity had always prevailed, the writings of the three co-founders Metrodorus, Hermarchus, and Polyaenus. The divinized founder could not be contradicted; he could only be correctly interpreted.

This created a characteristic Epicurean mode of philosophical innovation: apparent departures from the founder's positions were framed as superior exegesis, not as corrections. A later Epicurean who wished to introduce a new position had to show that the founders, "when properly interpreted," had in fact endorsed it – or at minimum had not contradicted it. This authorization procedure extended even to textual criticism: manuscripts were collated, disputed passages checked, and if necessary emended, to restore consistency to the canonical writings. Disputes between rival Epicurean communities – most notably between the Athenian Garden and the independent Rhodian Epicurean community – were framed as each side invoking Epicurean scripture in its support. As Sedley (2018, p. 107) notes, we should avoid calling any party in such disputes "dissident" Epicureans,

since all considered themselves loyalists. The scholarch of the Athenian school had no quasi-papal doctrinal authority; the appeal was always to the texts themselves.

Understanding this framework is essential for reading the *De Signis*. When Philodemus, Zeno of Sidon, and Demetrius of Laconia elaborate and defend the Epicurean "similarity method" against Stoic attack, they are not consciously innovating; they are developing and vindicating positions they regard as continuous with Epicurus' own methodology. The school's fundamental loyalty to Epicurean empiricism is never in question; what develops is the sophistication and argumentative armory with which that empiricism is defended.

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## The Early School: Epistemological Developments from Hermarchus to Timasagoras

### *Hermarchus and the Three Levels of Learning*

The earliest post-founder development traceable in Epicurean theory of knowledge comes from Hermarchus of Mytilene, Epicurus' immediate successor as school-head and one of the three co-founders. The longest continuous passage preserved from any early Epicurean apart from Epicurus himself – transcribed by Porphyry (*Abst.* I, 7–12 = Fr. 34 Longo Auricchio) – is from Hermarchus' *Against Empedocles*, and while its topic is primarily anthropological, it provides our earliest glimpse of Epicurean concepts at work among Epicurus' immediate successors.

Notably, the much-debated Epicurean term *ἐπιλογισμός* (epilogismos, inferential/inductive reasoning) appears in Hermarchus in what Sedley (2018, p. 106 n. 1) identifies as a more precise technical function than in Epicurus' own writings – as the third level in a three-tiered scale of learning:

1. Irrational perception unsupported by memory
2. Irrational perception supported by memory
3. Rational observation (*epilogismos*): the use of reason to draw conclusions from accumulated perceptual data

This hierarchy is significant for the *De Signis*: *epilogismos* is the faculty by which the Epicureans move from raw experience to knowledge of unobserved truths. That Hermarchus already assigns it a defined technical role suggests that the school was developing Epicurus' tools for gaining knowledge systematically from the very first generation.

### *Colotes and the Defense Against Academic Scepticism*

The most immediate external pressure on Epicurean theory of knowledge in the generation after Epicurus' death was the rise of Academic scepticism. In the 260s BCE Arcesilaus took over the headship of Plato's Academy and transformed it from a doctrinal school into an essentially critical and dialectical one, adopting universal suspension of judgment (*epochē*) as its stance toward all rival philosophical claims. The challenge this posed to the Epicurean criterion of truth – with its insistence that all perceptions are true and that knowledge of the physical world is achievable – was immediate and fundamental.

The Epicurean response in the first generation is exemplified by Colotes of Lampsacus, who had been a close personal associate of Epicurus himself. Colotes wrote a treatise entitled *The Impossibility of Life Itself According to Other Philosophers*, attacking a series of predecessors and contemporaries – Democritus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Socrates, Melissus, Plato, Stilpo, the Cyrenaics, and finally Arcesilaus – not for their ethical positions, but entirely for the ways their theory of knowledge and view of reality allegedly licensed scepticism about whether human beings can know physical reality at all. The final anonymous target, as Plutarch recognizes in his polemical reply *Against Colotes*, is the New Academy of Arcesilaus with its advocacy of universal *epochē*.

Colotes' treatise appears to have been composed not in Athens but in Alexandria, dedicated to Ptolemy II (*Adv. Col.* 1107E), with a peroration warning the Alexandrian king against the dangers to law and order posed by non-Epicurean philosophy. This indicates that the felt urgency of defending Epicurean theory of knowledge against scepticism was not merely an Athenian preoccupation but extended to the major cultural centers of the Hellenistic world, where royal patronage of philosophy was hotly contested (Sedley 2018, pp. 108–109).

### *Polystratus and the Defense of Relative Predicates*

A more philosophically sophisticated anti-sceptical intervention comes from Polystratus, probably the third Epicurean scholarch (writing mid-third century BCE). In his treatise *On Irrational Contempt* (more fully: *Against Those Who Irrationally Despise Popular Beliefs*), Polystratus engages opponents whose arguments closely reflect the sceptically inclined New Academy of Arcesilaus.

The specific dispute about knowledge and reality concerns relative predicates – fair/foul, beneficial/harmful, larger/smaller – as against absolute predicates like those applying to gold and stone. The Academic-style opponents argued: since values like "fair" and "foul" vary from culture to culture and are not universally agreed upon (unlike the nature of gold, which is the same everywhere), they are therefore falsely believed in and do not truly exist. Polystratus' reply is philosophically resourceful. He points out, drawing on Plato's own *Sophist* (255c), that Plato himself had presented an exhaustive division of beings into absolute and relative – and had never intended the existence of relative beings to be impugned by their relativity. Anyone who thinks that relativity implies non-existence, Polystratus observes, could equally argue that since relative predicates like "beneficial" and "harmful" manifestly are part of the structure of reality, it must be the non-relative items like minerals that are unreal. The inference from "not universally the same" to "falsely believed in" is simply a non sequitur. Relative predicates and absolute predicates both exist; they simply have different modes of existence (Sedley 2018, pp. 109–111).

What is remarkable about Polystratus' strategy is his willingness to deploy Platonic materials against Plato's own self-declared successors – an *ad hominem* approach with particular force when directed at the Academy. The episode illustrates the broader pattern of post-Epicurus theory of knowledge: innovation framed as defense of common sense and of Epicurus' core commitment to the reality of the perceptible world, against sceptical arguments that would undermine cognitive access to physical reality.

### *Timasagoras and the Defense of the Truth of All Perceptions*

Two further contributions to the theory of knowledge are attributable to Timasagoras, a Rhodian Epicurean of approximately 200 BCE, who represents the in-

dependent Epicurean community at Rhodes in its disputes with the Athenian Garden.

**First innovation – continuous effluences:** Timasagoras revised the school's standard doctrine of vision. Where mainstream Epicurean teaching held that objects emit a series of discrete atomic films (*eidōla*) that travel from the object's surface to the eye, Timasagoras held that these were continuous atomic streams or "effluences" (*ἀπόῤῥοιαι*, aporrhoiai), which nonetheless preserved and transmitted the external structure of the object seen (Aetius, *Plac.* IV, 13, 6). Timasagoras' authority was Epicurus himself, who had allowed "effluences" as one of three alternative forms for simulacra in the *Letter to Herodotus* (46).[3] Plausible motivations for this revision include: (a) addressing the challenge of explaining how the simulacra of large objects can shrink enough to enter the eye while retaining their original shape; and (b) making the Epicurean doctrine of vision a more credible competitor to the mathematical science of optics (Sedley 2018, p. 108).

**Second innovation – the squeezed-eye argument:** Of greater direct relevance to the *De Signis* debate is Timasagoras' intervention on a specific Academic counterexample to the Epicurean thesis that all perceptions are true. Cicero (*Lucullus* 80) preserves the argument, which ran as follows:

1. Epicurus holds that all sense-perceptions are true. If even one false perception were found, trust in the senses would collapse. Any apparent optical illusion is to be explained by the mind's misinterpretation of accurate visual data, not by error in the eye itself.
2. Academic critics respond with the counterexample of an eye squeezed out of shape: the result is that the observer falsely sees a single flame as two flames. Here the error appears to be in the visual data themselves, not added by the mind's opinion.
3. Timasagoras replies that he has himself repeatedly squeezed his eye while looking at a lamp, and has never observed two flames appearing. This personal testimony is offered to disqualify the Academic example as a genuine optical illusion, blocking it from serving as the single counterexample that Epicurus conceded would be sufficient to destroy his foundational doctrine about knowledge.

Whether Timasagoras meant (a) that the bare visual appearance never even momentarily looked to him like two flames, or (b) that he was never misled into thinking there actually were two flames, is debated by Sedley (2018, pp. 111–112); Cicero seems to understand (b). On either reading, the strategy is the same: deny the existence of the counterexample in order to protect the Epicurean thesis that error is always located in opinion added by the mind, never in the perceptions themselves.

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## The Fourth Criterion of Truth: A Post-Epicurean Addition – and a Problematic One

### *The Diogenes Laertius Passage*

Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* X, 31) records a striking passage concerning the Epicurean criteria of truth:

> "Thus in The Canon Epicurus says that the tests of truth are the sensations and concepts (*prolepsis* = pre-concept) and the feelings; the Epicureans add to these the intuitive apprehensions of the mind."[4]

The first three criteria – sense-perceptions, preconceptions, and feelings – are commonplace in Epicurus' own surviving writings and in all subsequent Epicurean generations. Sedley (2018, p. 113) observes that the fourth item, *phantastikai epibolai tēs dianoias*, is also twice appealed to by Epicurus himself (Ep. Hdt. 38; RS XXIV) as though it were another criterion of truth. He therefore takes the school's reported innovation to consist in nothing more than making the criterial status of this fourth item *explicit* – elevating to formal status what had been implicit in Epicurus' practice. The significance, in Sedley's reading, is that this expression was felt to capture above all Epicurus' powers of extended intellectual vision: the capacity to project the mind through infinite space to grasp the implications of atomic theory and the plurality of worlds.

### *The Critical Issue: Was This Consistent with Epicurus' Own Reasoning?*

**It is essential to note clearly that this addition of a "fourth criterion" was NOT the position of Epicurus himself, and that it is in serious tension with**

**– if not directly contradictory to – the reasoning by which Epicurus established his three-pronged canon in the first place.**

Norman DeWitt, in his landmark study *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (1954), is particularly emphatic on this point. DeWitt argues that the structure of Epicurus' canon was deliberate and carefully reasoned. The three criteria – sensation (*aisthēsis*), preconception (*prolēpsis*), and feeling (*pathos*) – are not an arbitrary list but reflect a principled division corresponding to the three faculties of cognition: external sense, intellect, and the internal sense of pleasure and pain. Each criterion covers its own domain without overlap, and together they are intended to be exhaustive. Sensation gives us knowledge of the external world; preconceptions give us our general concepts, formed from accumulated sensations; feelings give us knowledge of what to pursue and avoid.

For DeWitt, the attempt to add *phantastikai epibolai tēs dianoias* as a fourth criterion collapses a crucial distinction: **the difference between the criteria themselves and the act of applying them**. The "projection of thought" (*epibole tēs dianoias*) is not a criterion in the same sense as sensation or preconception; it is rather the *act* by which the mind directs attention to and apprehends what the criteria present. It is a cognitive operation, not a source of evidence. Adding it as a co-equal criterion alongside sensation and preconception confuses the faculty of attention with the objects of attention – a confusion that, on Epicurean principles, would be precisely the kind of empty philosophical verbalism that Epicurus was at pains to avoid.

More broadly: Epicurus' entire project of establishing how knowledge works was to ground all legitimate knowledge in what is given directly to perception and feeling, with no independent role for purely rational or intellectual "projections" that are not ultimately traceable to sensation. A "fourth criterion" of pure intellectual projection, if taken seriously as an independent criterion, would risk opening the door to exactly the kind of unanchored rationalistic speculation – claims to knowledge based on the power of intellect alone, independent of sensory grounding – that Epicurus explicitly rejected in both his physics and his theory of knowledge. The Epicurean *epibole tēs dianoias* is always a *focused attention* on what perception has already provided or on what analogy from perception licenses; it is not an independent pipeline to truth.

**In summary: the addition of *phantastikai epibolai tēs dianoias* as a fourth criterion of truth is a post-Epicurean development by the school, not a position Epicurus himself took in his foundational work on knowledge, the *Kanon*. And as DeWitt and others have pointed out, it represents a departure – however well-intentioned by those who made it – from the coherent structure of the three-pronged canon that Epicurus carefully designed. Students of Epicurean philosophy should treat this "fourth criterion" with corresponding caution, recognizing it as a later school elaboration rather than as an authoritative statement of Epicurus' own position on how knowledge works.**

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### A Note on Lucretius

The first century BCE Epicurean poet Lucretius (*De rerum natura*) provides much of the detailed physics and theory of knowledge that is attributed to Epicurus, often with greater richness than Epicurus' own surviving writings. The natural assumption is that Lucretius faithfully follows Epicurus' major treatise *On Nature* – a view he himself declares (*DRN* III, 1–13).

Sedley (2018, pp. 112–113; cf. *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, 1998, ch. 3) argues for this view: Lucretius worked directly from Epicurus' *On Nature* without incorporating the later school developments traced in the present document. If this is correct – and it remains contested – it has an important consequence: when Lucretius discusses topics concerning knowledge, he may be giving us a closer window onto *Epicurus' own* positions than the works of Philodemus, Zeno of Sidon, or Demetrius of Laconia, whose developments in their account of knowledge were shaped by the specific controversies of the first century BCE. The reader of the *De Signis* should therefore be cautious about reading the sophisticated Zeno-Philodemus apparatus backward into Epicurus himself; some of it is a genuine development, however loyally it was framed by its authors.

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## Epicurean Anti-Reductionism and Its Epistemological Foundations

### *Epicurus vs. Democritus: Two Kinds of Atomism*

One of the most important – and most consistently misunderstood – aspects of Epicurus' account of reality is his relationship to the atomist tradition he inherited from Democritus. Sedley's "Epicurean Anti-Reductionism" (1988) makes the decisive case that the two atomists, despite sharing the view that everything is ultimately composed of atoms and void, hold fundamentally different views about the nature of reality – and that this difference has direct consequences for our understanding of knowledge.

Democritus was a reductionist and in his more extreme moods an eliminativist: because everything ultimately reduces to atoms and their configurations, phenomenal properties like colour, taste, and mental states are not fully real (*ētēi*), but only conventional constructions (*nomōi*) placed by the experiencing subject on atomic aggregates that lack these properties in themselves. Democritus is the archetypal bottom-up theorist who generates the phenomenal world from atoms, with the demerit that the phenomenal world turns out to be in reality entirely different from the way it appears (Sedley 1988, p. 298–299). Crucially, Sedley argues, this eliminative reductionism led directly to Democritus' cognitive scepticism: if colours, beliefs, and mental states are mere arbitrary atomic constructions, there is no reliable access to reality, and knowledge becomes impossible. Epicurus recognized and objected to this sceptical and deterministic implication from the start.

Epicurus retains the atomic framework as a causal and explanatory tool but **refuses to accept that atoms and void are the only genuinely real entities**. In the *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus is explicit that by "bodies" he means above all phenomenal objects – men, stones, trees – and that "void" is his general term for the space these familiar objects occupy and move through (Ep. Hdt. 39–40). The subsequent derivation of atoms as the ultimate constituents is a *downward* theoretical move, not a retraction of the standing in reality of phenomenal bodies. Atoms are, for Epicurus, *aetiologically* primary (the fundamental causal level of explanation) without being *ontologically* privileged over phenomenal entities. Men and stones are *per se* existents in Epicurus' world alongside atoms and void;

they are not demoted to the status of mere appearances or useful fictions (Sedley 1988, pp. 303–304, 312–313).

### *The Ontological Structure: Properties and Accidents*

The detailed structure of Epicurean ontology – worked out by Sedley through close analysis of Ep. Hdt. 68 ff. and the Demetrius of Laconia passage in Sextus (*M* X 219–27) – divides existing things as follows:

- ***Per se* existents** (*kath' auto*): things that exist in their own right – bodies (including both phenomenal objects and atoms) and void.
- **Properties** (*symbebēkota*): things that exist by virtue of belonging to *per se* existents. Properties divide into:
  - **Inseparable properties** (*aei symbebēkota* or *aidia symbebēkota*): essential features without which the thing cannot be conceived – e.g., resistance and tangibility for body, non-resistance for void, weight and shape for atoms. These hold necessarily and cannot be removed without fatal destruction of the thing.
  - **Accidents** (*symptōmata*): non-essential, contingent features whose arrival and departure the thing's nature survives intact – slavery, poverty, war, peace; and crucially, **colours, sensory qualities, and mental states**.

The key key point about knowledge is that **accidents do not exist at the microscopic level** (*en tois aoratos*, Ep. Hdt. 68-69). Colour, pleasure, pain, volition, and other phenomenal states are real – they genuinely exist – but they exist *only* at the level of experience, not at the level of atoms. Epicurus thus simultaneously upholds the truth of sensations (sensory qualities are genuinely real) and the correctness of atomism (atoms themselves lack colour, taste, etc.). There is no contradiction: the two levels of description are both true, each applying to its own domain. This is, as Sedley notes, "a far cry from the simple materialist Epicurus so familiar from histories of ancient thought" (Sedley 1988, p. 324).[5]

### *Emergent Properties and Downward Causation*

The most philosophically striking consequence of Epicurean anti-reductionism is the theory of **emergent properties**. Sedley argues that Epicurus held that matter in certain complex states can acquire genuinely new, non-physical properties

that are not present at the level of the constituent atoms and are not merely supervenient consequences of atomic motions (Sedley 1988, pp. 321–323).

The clearest case is volition (*voluntas*). Volition is an accidental property of the rational mind – it exists only at the phenomenal level and is not identical with any pattern of atomic motion. Yet Lucretius, on Epicurus' behalf, insists that volition acts *causally upon* the body's atoms: it is the mind's volition that directs the *copia materiai* in the limbs (*DRN* II 261–2, 266–71, 279–93). This is **downward causation** – a higher-level property exercising causal influence on lower-level constituents – and it is explicitly what distinguishes self-determining animals from tables and stones (Sedley 1988, pp. 317–321).

The *On Nature* passage analyzed in the "Refutation of Determinism" paper makes this explicit (text at Sedley 1983, pp. 36–37): the self-determining animal's failures are caused "by themselves – selves which are not identical with their constituent atoms" (lines 2–4).[6] The nature of their atoms has contributed nothing to certain of their actions; rather, these are caused by *apogegennēmena* – characteristics "developed" subsequent to birth that differ from the underlying atoms "in a transcendent way" (*kata tina tropon dialēptikon*), acquiring causation that proceeds from the self and in turn transmits its influence back to the primary substances.

Sedley identifies this as Epicurus' theory of **radically emergent properties** (Sedley 1988, p. 321): matter in certain complex states acquires entirely new, non-physical properties, not governed by the laws of physics. The best analogy he offers is a sufficiently sophisticated computer that acquires a mind of its own – ceasing to be a mechanism and becoming an autonomous agent whose behaviour is no longer predictable from the laws of electronics alone. Epicurus holds that the autonomous powers of which we are instinctively aware are not merely aspects of an extremely sophisticated mechanism, but are precisely what they seem to be: capacities to control the body's matter in ways genuinely free of antecedent mechanical causation.

### *Why This Matters for Epistemology*

This non-reductionist account of reality has direct and essential implications for how the Epicureans understand knowledge, and these connect directly to the *De Signis* debate:

**1. The truth of sensations is grounded in the genuine reality of phenomenal properties.** Sensations are true because they accurately report phenomenal-level properties – colours, tastes, textures – that are genuinely real at that level. The reason Epicurus can insist, against Democritus, that all sensations are true is precisely that he refuses to reduce phenomenal properties to mere atomic constructions. There is something real for the sensation to accurately report. Democritus' scepticism was the direct offspring of his reductionism; Epicurus' anti-scepticism is the direct offspring of his anti-reductionism (Sedley 1988, pp. 325, 34).

**2. Cognitive scepticism is self-refuting.** Sedley argues (1988, pp. 33–34) that Epicurus' refutation of cognitive scepticism and his refutation of mechanistic determinism are deliberately parallel – both show the offending doctrine to be self-undermining in practice. If all phenomenal properties (including rational judgments, beliefs, arguments) are mere arbitrary constructions with no genuine epistemic standing, then the sceptic's own argument is equally a mere construction and can claim no rational assent. The anti-reductionist alternative – that phenomenal properties are genuinely real and that sensations accurately report them – is what Epicurus' theory of knowledge depends on, and what his metaphysics is designed to support.

**3. The levels of description are both true; neither displaces the other.** Epicurus' key insight, as Sedley summarizes it (1988, p. 34), is 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."[7] The truth that colour is a real phenomenal property of visible bodies is not contradicted by, but is explained (causally) by, the truth that atoms are colourless. This is the foundation in the nature of reality for the *De Signis* methodology: analogical inference from phenomenal experience to the sub-perceptible level is epistemically legitimate precisely because the two levels are both real and the latter is genuinely explanatory of the former.

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## Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism: The *On Nature* Text and its Epistemological Significance

### *The Central Text*

Sedley's "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism" (1983) presents and analyzes a remarkable passage from a late book (possibly Book XXXV) of Epicurus' major work *On Nature*, preserved in three badly damaged papyrus copies (PHerc. 697, 1056, and 1191). This text, which Sedley was the first to read in a textually accurate form, contains Epicurus' own sustained argument against mechanistic determinism – the view that human behaviour, like everything else in the universe, can be exhaustively accounted for in terms of material (ultimately atomic) changes, and that talk of intentions, desires, and autonomous agency is explanatorily superfluous.

The target is not primarily the Stoics (who, at the time Epicurus was writing, had not yet developed their fully elaborated determinism) but rather the inheritors of Democritean atomism – philosophers who took reductionist atomism to its logical conclusion and thereby eliminated autonomous selfhood and genuine moral responsibility. Sedley plausibly suggests this brand of mechanistic determinism may have had footholds even within Epicurus' own school, explaining the urgency of the refutation (Sedley 1983, pp. 35–36).

### *The Three-Stage Argument*

The *On Nature* passage runs through three argumentative moves that Sedley identifies as structurally parallel to Lucretius' anti-scepticism in *DRN* IV 469–521:

**Stage 1: Self-refutation (*perikamō ... ho logos trépetai*).** The determinist's own practice of philosophical debate refutes his thesis. To debate – to argue, to praise an opponent's point or blame his reasoning, to hold him responsible for talking nonsense – is to implicitly attribute autonomous agency to oneself and one's interlocutor. The determinist who presents his case cannot simultaneously claim that his opponent is responsible for holding a wrong view (lines 29–35). If he tries to escape by saying that his own arguing is also necessitated, he enters an infinite regress – yet at every step he continues to apportion credit and blame

between himself and his opponent, as if both were autonomous agents (lines 32–35). His argument is therefore "self-refuting" (*perikamō*) in the pragmatic sense: it is contradicted by his own behaviour at every moment of its presentation. The determinist "fails to use empirical reasoning (*epilogismos*, lines 33–34)" – he fails to check his theoretical claims against the evidence of his own practice. [8]

**Stage 2: The preconception argument.** If the determinist claims merely to be *renaming* what we call "our own agency" (*to di' hēmōn autōn*) as "necessity," he has not shown that our preconception (*prolēpsis*) of autonomous agency is a faulty one. Epicurean preconceptions are empirically grounded generic concepts formed by cumulative experience; they are primary sources of information about the types of thing they represent. To challenge a preconception one must show specifically how its delineation has failed to convey the facts – as Epicurus himself does when arguing that the popular preconception of gods as concerned with human affairs is defective (Ep. Men. 123–4; cf. Sedley 1983, pp. 27–28). The determinist who simply relabels our agency as necessity without doing this work is "merely changing a name" (lines 38–48).

**Stage 3: The pragmatic argument.** A genuine distinction between necessitated and non-necessitated actions has practical consequences: someone who correctly understands that certain actions are necessitated (e.g., that everyone must die) can thereby dissuade people from futilely resisting those necessities. The determinist who denies the distinction between necessitated and non-necessitated actions gives up the ability to make any such practically effective distinction. His position thus has "no hold on reality" – it changes words without changing any of the practices that depend on recognizing the difference (lines 43–51).

### *The Non-Reductionist Self and Apogegennēmena*

The text also contains Epicurus' positive account of what autonomous agency actually is – what distinguishes self-determining animals (including humans) from wild animals and from pure atomic mechanisms. The key term is *apogegennēmena* – "developments" or characteristics acquired subsequent to birth. Epicurus argues (lines 2–19 of the second quoted passage) that while atomic makeup determines an animal's initial congenital nature, the self-determining animal subsequently develops characteristics that differ from its atomic constitution "in

a transcendent way" (*kata tina tropon dialēptikon*) – acquiring a causal efficacy that "proceeds from the self" and in turn transmits itself back to the primary atomic substances.

This is Epicurus' non-reductionist psychology: the developed self is not the plaything of its constituent atoms but a genuine causal power capable of controlling them. Lucretius captures this when he insists that even though the atomic composition of the mind at birth determines natural temperament, nothing prevents our learning to overcome that temperament (*DRN* III 288–322). The natural coward can learn courage through rational reflexion; and when he does, his new brave disposition exerts a stabilizing influence on his formerly disordered soul atoms (Sedley 1983, p. 39).

Crucially, Sedley identifies the *apogegennēmena* as corresponding to what Sedley 1988 calls emergent properties: characteristics that differ from their atomic substrate "not in the way which is like viewing from a different distance" (i.e., not merely a matter of scale or perspective, as with colour vs. colourless atoms) but in a "transcendent" (*dialēptikon*) way that reverses the direction of causation.[9] It is now the higher-level emergent state that acts upon the atoms, not the atoms that determine the higher-level state.

### *The Connection to Epistemology and the De Signis*

The "Refutation of Determinism" connects to Epicurean theory of knowledge in several ways that bear directly on the *De Signis*:

**1. *Epilogismos* as the method the determinist fails to use.** The refutation charges the determinist with failing to use *epilogismos* – empirical, inductive reasoning that checks theoretical claims against experienced reality. This is the same faculty whose role in Hermarchus (as the third level of learning) was noted above, and which plays a central role throughout the *De Signis* as the cognitive operation by which the similarity method is employed. The determinist fails precisely because he does not bring his theoretical claims back to the test of observed experience – including the experience of his own agency and the phenomenal reality of praise, blame, and persuasion.

**2. The reality of autonomous agency validates the epistemic subject.** If all human reasoning were simply the mechanical output of atomic motions, there

would be no subject capable of performing genuine epistemic acts – no one who could actually reason correctly or incorrectly, compare claims with evidence, or reach warranted conclusions. Epicurus' anti-reductionist insistence on the genuine reality of the autonomous self is thus a precondition for the very possibility of rational knowledge. The Epicurean empirical method presupposes a knower who can genuinely reason, compare, and judge; and that presupposition is philosophically grounded in the anti-reductionist account of the self.

**3. The parallel with the anti-sceptic argument.** Sedley demonstrates the deliberate structural parallel between the anti-determinist argument and Lucretius' anti-sceptical argument in *DRN* IV (Sedley 1983, p. 33–34). Both show the offending doctrine to be self-defeating and untenable in practice. The same three moves – self-refutation, linguistic/preconception challenge, pragmatic challenge – appear in both. This is not coincidental: cognitive scepticism and mechanistic determinism are, for Epicurus, twin offspring of Democritean reductionism. By showing that both are self-refuting, Epicurus simultaneously vindicates both his non-reductionist account of reality (the genuine reality of phenomenal properties and autonomous selves) and his empiricist theory of knowledge (the truth of sensations, the validity of inductive inference, the possibility of genuine knowledge).

**4. Sedley's summary of the integrated position.** Epicurus' primary motivation across both the anti-determinist and anti-sceptical arguments, Sedley concludes (1983, pp. 34–35), was to rescue atomism from the "internal rot of reductionism." Democritean reductionism generated both cognitive scepticism (by eliminating the reality of phenomenal properties) and mechanistic determinism (by eliminating the reality of autonomous agency). Epicurus' response on both fronts was the same: insist that phenomenal properties and autonomous selves are genuinely real, that the atomic level explains but does not eliminate the phenomenal level, and that therefore sensations are true and persons are genuinely responsible agents. This integrated metaphysical position is the deep foundation beneath the debates about knowledge of the *De Signis*.

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# I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

## The Work and Its Transmission

The treatise survives as PHerc. 1065, one of the Herculaneum papyri. Thirty-eight columns of continuous text have been restored, constituting only the **final portion** of the original roll; how much preceded the surviving text is unknown. The title is damaged; likely candidates include *Peri phainomenon kai semeioseōn* ("On Appearances and Sign-Inferences") or *Peri phantasion kai semeioseōn* ("On Impressions and Sign-Inferences"). De Lacy uses the shorthand *De Signis*.

The text was first edited by T. Gomperz (1865); the De Lacy edition of 1978 is the first based on autopsy of the papyrus itself, with further collation by M. Gigante and associates in 1977. Many passages remain conjectural.

## Authorship, Date, and Historical Setting

Philodemus of Gadara (c. 110–40/35 B.C.) was a student of **Zeno of Sidon** and **Demetrius Lacon** at Athens, subsequently founder and leader of an Epicurean school at Naples under the patronage of L. Calpurnius Piso. He was a contemporary of Cicero, Vergil's teacher Siro, and the Roman literary circle that included Varius Rufus and Quintilius Varus (De Lacy, Essay I, pp. 145–154).

The treatise can be dated approximately: a reference to pygmies brought from Syria/Hyria by "Antony" (col. ii.18) places it either around 54 B.C. or around 40 B.C., with both dates defended in the scholarship (De Lacy, Essay II, pp. 163–164).

## The Debate: Epicureans vs. Stoics on Inference from Signs

The *De Signis* records a live controversy between the **Epicurean school** and their **Stoic opponents** (identified by Sedley, pp. 240–241, and De Lacy, Essay V, pp. 206–207 as Stoics of the mid-to-late second century B.C., probably including the Stoic Dionysius of Cyrene). The central issue is the **validity as a path to knowledge of empirical inference**: can we know facts about the unperceived world with genuine certainty on the basis of observed experience, or is such inference inherently merely probable?

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## II. STRUCTURE OF THE SURVIVING TEXT

The extant columns fall into four major sections (De Lacy, Essay II, pp. 156–162):

**Section 1 (Cols. ia–xi.28): From Zeno of Sidon's writings** - Stoic arguments against Epicurean empirical inference (cols. ia–xi.26) - Epicurean replies (cols. xi.29–xix.4)

**Section 2 (Cols. xix.9–xxvii.28): From Bromius' account of Zeno** - Eight Stoic arguments and Epicurean replies

**Section 3 (Cols. xxvii.28–xxix.16): From Demetrius Lacon** - Five "pervasive errors" of those who oppose analogy

**Section 4 (Cols. xxix–xxxviii.22): Anonymous Epicurean (possibly Demetrius continued)** - Fifteen further points of analysis

**Conclusion (Col. xxxviii.22–32):** Brief half-hearted proposal to discuss medical empiricism.

**Fragments (1–8):** Loosely related material on broader topics concerning knowledge (criteria of truth, knowledge of gods, distinction of temporally vs. naturally imperceptible things).

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## III. MAJOR ARGUMENTS: STOIC SIDE

### The Foundational Stoic Distinction: Particular vs. Common Signs (Cols. i.1–19)

The Stoics argue that only **particular signs** (*idion sēmeion*) provide valid inference. A particular sign is one that cannot exist unless the thing it signifies also exists – its negation entails co-negation of the sign. A **common sign** (*koinon sēmeion*), by contrast, can exist whether or not what it signifies exists; therefore it provides no reliable basis for inference (col. i.1–19; De Lacy, pp. 91–92 n. 2).

The test of a particular sign is **elimination/contraposition** (*anaskeuē*, *kat' anaskeuen tropos*): hypothetically "eliminate" the thing signified, and if the sign is thereby co-eliminated, the connection is sound.

*Sedley's analysis* (pp. 242–248): The Stoic use of "common" here is unusual – normally "common" means a sign of multiple things; here it means common to truth and falsity.[10] Sedley argues this terminology derives from the Stoic need to defend the infallible criterion of truth (*katalēptikē phantasia*) against the New Academy. The elimination method is connected to Chrysippus' test of *sunartēsis* (cohesion): a sound conditional holds when the contradictory of the consequent conflicts with the antecedent. The method has Aristotelian roots (from *Categories* 7b15–8a12) but is applied innovatively to propositions rather than concepts.

### Stoic Argument 1: The Non-Necessity of Generalization (Col. ia; cf. Ch. 1 of translation)

Things existing in our experience need not exist in places we cannot perceive, and vice versa. An inference from the presence of something in our experience to its presence everywhere is simply not "binding" (*anankē*). (The Epicurean reply is at chs. 18 and onward.)

### Stoic Argument 2: Unique Cases Undermine Analogy (Cols. i.19–ii.25; Ch. 3)

There are unique objects within our experience: the magnet draws iron, amber attracts chaff, the square of four is the only square whose perimeter equals its area. If there are unique cases in our experience, there may be unique cases outside it that defeat analogical inference. *How can we infer that all men die when their heart is cut, if exceptions might exist beyond our experience?* (De Lacy, pp. 92–93; cf. Sedley pp. 248–249 on Dionysius' use of "freaks" – *terata*.)

### Stoic Argument 3: Rare Cases (Cols. ii–iii; Ch. 4)

Some things within our experience are rare rather than merely unique: the Alexandrian dwarf with the hammer-proof head, the man of Epidaurus who changed sex, the giant inferred from bones in Crete, the pygmies from Syria (col. ii.18). Such rare cases suggest the universe may contain rare analogues that invalidate induction (De Lacy, p. 93).

### Stoic Argument 4: Contraposition Is the Only Formally Valid Method (Cols. ii.25–iv.37)

The Stoics argue that only inferences which pass the contraposition test are genuinely valid. Empirical inferences from similarity do not meet this standard. (Sedley, pp. 244–248: the elimination method establishes connections that hold necessarily and are knowable *a priori*, whether by formal entailment or by analytic dependence of meaning.)

### Stoic Argument 5: Atomism Is Inconsistent with Empiricism (Cols. iv.37–v.7)

Since all bodies in experience are destructible and have color, the Epicureans should, on their own analogical method, ascribe destructibility and color to atoms. Their failure to do so betrays inconsistency in their own method (De Lacy, Essay V, pp. 215, 221).

### Stoic Argument 6: Grounds for Preferring One Inference Over Another (Cols. v.8–36)

On what basis do the Epicureans select *which* similarities to use for inference? Any selection implies a criterion that goes beyond the mere observation of similarities (De Lacy, Essay II, p. 158).

### Stoic Dilemma: Identity vs. Similarity (Cols. v.37–vi.36; Chs. 5–6)

The Stoics pose a dilemma: if inference requires **identical** objects, sign and signified collapse into one thing (no inference is possible); if inference requires merely **similar** objects, the difference present might be sufficient to destroy the inference. This dilemma appears to show that empirical inference is inherently unstable (De Lacy, Essay II, pp. 159; De Lacy p. 215 in Essay V).

### Dionysius' Specific Arguments (Cols. vii.5–xi.26; Chs. 7–11)

The Stoic Dionysius adds three further arguments:

1. **Ambiguity of "similarity"** (cols. vii.5–38; ch. 7): The word *homoiotēs* is equivocal; it covers both essential and accidental similarity. Unless the Epicureans can specify which similarity grounds inference, the method is indeterminate.

2. **The qualifier "when nothing conflicts" is worthless** (cols. vii.38–ix.8; chs. 8–9): The Epicureans say analogy holds "when nothing in appearances conflicts." But it can never be empirically determined that *nothing* conflicts, since one can never examine all possible appearances. This makes the qualifier a blank check that can never be cashed (De Lacy, Essay II, p. 159; De Lacy p. 216).
3. **Partial similarity** (cols. ix.8–xi.26; chs. 10–11): Inference from partial similarity cannot establish facts about unperceived objects, since the dimension of similarity and the dimension of difference may coincide (De Lacy, Essay II, p. 159).

### Bromius' Eight Arguments Against Analogy (Cols. xix.9–xxvii.28; Section 2)

Bromius presents another version of the Stoic case (originally from Zeno). The eight arguments ask, respectively:

1. It is impossible to examine all appearances; examining only some is insufficient (cols. xix.12–19).
2. Wide variations within experience suggest uncontrollable variations outside it (cols. xix.19–25).
3. Neither identical nor non-identical objects can ground inference (cols. xix.25–36).
4. Inductive inference presupposes its conclusion (cols. xix.36–xx.4).
5. Peculiarities outside experience may defeat any inference (cols. xx.4–10).
6. Unique cases within experience cannot be extended beyond it (cols. xx.10–11).
7. Unusual things within experience defeat generalization (cols. xx.11–21).
8. Epicurean physics (gods, atoms) contradicts their own analogical method (cols. xx.21–30).

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## IV. MAJOR ARGUMENTS: EPICUREAN SIDE (PHILODEMUS' POSITION)

### The Two Methods of Sign-Inference (Cols. 8.7–10; cf. Sedley p. 242)

Philodemus accepts, as common ground with the Stoics, that there are exactly two methods of sign-inference:

- **The similarity method** (*ho kath' homoiotēta tropos*): inference from observed resemblance, covering both simple induction and analogy. This is the primary Epicurean method.
- **The elimination method** (*ho kat' anaskeuen tropos*): inference by which the negation of the consequent entails the negation of the antecedent. This is the Stoics' preferred method, which the Epicureans do not wholly reject but regard as derivative.

The crucial Epicurean claim – against the Stoics – is that the similarity method is not merely probable but achieves genuine epistemic certainty when properly conducted.

### Analogy Satisfies Formal Requirements (Cols. xi.29–xii.36; Chs. 11–12)

The first two Stoic arguments (lost but inferable from the replies) apparently challenged whether analogy meets any formal standard of valid inference. Philodemus replies that the similarity method *does* satisfy formal validity requirements: properly constructed analogical inferences are not logically defective (De Lacy, Essay II, p. 157).

### The Criterion of Inconceivability (***adianoeiston***) (Cols. xiv.2–27; Ch. 14)

This is one of Philodemus' most important contributions to the theory of knowledge. Against the Stoic claim that only contraposition establishes particular signs, Philodemus argues that **inconceivability** provides an independent and equally valid criterion.

When the similarity between sign and thing signified is so strong that it becomes *literally inconceivable* that the one should exist without the other, we have established a particular sign – and thereby a necessary inference – through the empirical method. The example: "Since Epicurus is a man, Metrodorus is a man" (col. xiv.2–27). It is inconceivable that Epicurus should be a man while Metrodorus is not. This inconceivability is not *a priori* or analytic; it is grounded in extensive empirical observation of human nature. But it is genuinely *necessary*, not merely probable.

*De Lacy's comment* (Essay V, p. 218): "Inconceivability, however, is an empirical test. A thing is inconceivable only in terms of our experience, and inferences based on inconceivability are examples of the method of analogy."

*Sedley's comment* (p. 257): This kind of inconceivability "may lack strict logical force, but it is regarded as an entirely cogent criterion of inference, and the best available."[11]

### The Circularity of the Stoic Method (Cols. viii.26–ix.8; xvi.4–17)

Philodemus makes a fundamental counter-argument: **Stoic contraposition is only valid insofar as it is grounded in empirical analogy**. Unless we have first established by observation that motion cannot occur without void, the conditional "If there is motion, there is void" cannot be asserted at all. The formal Stoic test is epistemically parasitic on the empirical method it purports to supersede. If analogy lacks necessity and certainty, then so does contraposition (De Lacy, Essay V, p. 217–218; Sedley, pp. 258–262).

This is stated at cols. viii.32–ix.3 (De Lacy translation, p. 217): > "We first determine empirically all the conditions attendant on motion in our experience, apart from which we see nothing moved; then, in view of the similarity, we judge that all moving objects in every case are subject to these conditions; and this is the method by which we infer that it is not possible for motion to occur without void."[12]

### Unique and Rare Cases Support Rather Than Undermine Analogy (Chs. 20–21; Cols. xiv.28–xvi.4)

The Epicurean reply to the argument from magnets and unique cases is elegant: **uniqueness strengthens rather than undermines analogy**. If *some* magnets

drew iron and others did not, an analogical inference about magnets would be unreliable. But since *all* magnets within our experience draw iron without exception, we can legitimately infer that this is characteristic of all magnets everywhere. Perfect consistency within experience is the strongest possible basis for analogical inference (De Lacy, Essay V, p. 218–219).

Similarly, the range of variation within our experience is always bounded. We cannot conceive of men made of iron who walk through walls; variations outside our experience must be analogous in kind and degree to those within it (cols. xxi.30–xxii.2; cf. De Lacy, Essay V, p. 219):

> "The degree of certainty of an inference is often relative to the amount of variation observable."[13]

### Not All Appearances Need to Be Examined (Cols. xx.35–xxi.3)

Against the Stoic claim that empirical inquiry is interminable, Philodemus states (translation at De Lacy, Essay V, p. 219):

> "We must encounter many homogeneous and varied appearances, so that from our experience of them and from the accounts of history concerning them we may establish the inseparable property of each particular thing, and from these pass to all the others."[14]

The number of cases required varies with circumstances: sometimes one instance suffices; sometimes only a few; sometimes many fail to remove all uncertainty (col. xxvi.32–39). The task is not infinite, and completion is achievable for most inferences.

### The Defense of Epicurean Atomism (Cols. xvii.37–xviii.16)

Against the charge that atoms should be assigned color and destructibility by analogy with perceptible bodies, Philodemus draws on the Epicurean doctrine of primary and secondary qualities:

> "Bodies in our experience are destructible not *insofar as* they are bodies, but *insofar as* they partake of a nature opposed to the corporeal and non-resistant. Similarly, bodies in our experience have color, but not *insofar as* they are bodies; for tangible objects insofar as they resist the touch are bodies, but in-

> sofar as they are tangible they reveal no color." (Cols. xvii.37–xviii.8; De Lacy, Essay V, p. 221)

Inference requires identifying the *relevant* similarity – the quality as it belongs to a thing *qua* member of a class. Tangibility is a generic property of bodies as bodies; color is not. This is an empirically derived distinction, not an *a priori* one.

### Resolution of the Identity/Similarity Dilemma (Cols. xxii.2–28)

The Stoic dilemma (infer from identical objects – no inference possible; infer from similar objects – difference may destroy the inference) is dissolved by specifying **degrees of similarity and the level of inference**. Inferences can be made:

- From particular men to others especially like them
- From one class of men to another
- From classes of animals to those most closely related
- Between identical objects if one is perceptible and the other not (e.g., the inferred void resembles motion-permitting space)
- Between non-identical objects (men and gods) *insofar as* they share common attributes (De Lacy, Essay V, p. 220)

### The Fourfold Meaning of "Insofar As" (Cols. xxxiii.21–xxxvi.7; Ch. 10 of pervasive errors list)

This is one of the most technically sophisticated sections. The anonymous Epicurean identifies four uses of the qualification *hēi* / *kathō* ("insofar as," "qua," "according as"):

1. **Necessary concomitant**: "Men, insofar as they are men, are prone to disease and aging" – a necessary empirical connection.
2. **Definition/preconception (*prolēpsis*)**: "Man, insofar as he is man, is a rational animal" – a definitional connection.[15]
3. **Accident**: "Man, insofar as he is man, [walks when he wishes]" – a contingent but regular property.[16]

4. **Necessary concomitant of a property**: "[A man, insofar as he] is foolish, is utterly unhappy" – a necessary connection grounded in one specific property.

The Stoics assume that all "insofar as" premises are established by their elimination method. The Epicurean response: all four meanings involve some kind of necessary connection, but **all are established empirically**. Even apparently definitional truths like "men are mortal" must be confirmed by inductive research (cols. xxxv.4–29). To assume *a priori* that "men qua men are mortal" is to presuppose what only observation can establish (De Lacy, Essay II, pp. 161–162; Sedley, pp. 258–259).

Sedley characterizes this as "a head-on confrontation between empiricism and rationalism" (p. 259).[17]

## The Relation Between Elimination and Similarity Methods (Cols. xxxv.22–xxxvii; Sedley §3)

This section resolves an apparent inconsistency: in some passages Philodemus seems to grant the validity of the elimination method for inferences like "Since there is motion, there is void" (cols. 12.1–14, 35.29–36.7), yet in others he insists the similarity method is primary.[18] Sedley's interpretation (pp. 260–263), which De Lacy's analysis supports, resolves this:[19]

The two methods work at **different stages** of a single inquiry:

1. **Stage 1 (Similarity method / sign-inference proper)**: Through extensive observation of moving objects within experience, we establish the empirical generalization that motion is impossible without empty space. This inductive stage is the genuine *sēmeiōsis* (sign-inference).
2. **Stage 2 (Elimination method)**: Once Stage 1 has been completed, the formal step "Since there is motion, there is void" follows by the elimination method – trivially, because the nature of motion (as established by Stage 1) includes its inseparability from void.[20]

The elimination method alone "is not in itself a further sign-inference, since on its own it is powerless to reveal anything" (Sedley, p. 263; cf. col. 30.33–31.36). It adds no epistemic content; it merely formalizes what Stage 1 discovered. The

Epicureans call Stage 1 the "sign-inference" and explicitly withhold the term *sēmeiōsis* from Stage 2 precisely to prevent the Stoics from claiming that the *formal* step does the epistemic work.

*De Lacy's formulation* (Essay V, p. 218): "The abstract principle of the Stoics can be formulated only after experience justifies it through an argument based on analogy. Therefore, the Epicurean concludes, inference by contraposition can claim no certainty if analogy has none, as the latter is the source and ultimate criterion of the former."

### The Non-Contestation Requirement (Cols. xxxvi.7–17; Ch. 11 of pervasive errors)

A sound analogical inference requires that no known appearance conflicts with its conclusion. This is the Epicurean principle of *ouk antimarturēsis* ("non-contestation"), carried into the *De Signis*:

> "They are also mistaken not to see that we ascertain that there is no obstacle resulting from appearances. For it is not enough to accept the minimal swerves of atoms on the grounds of chance and free will, but it is necessary to show in addition that no other self-evident fact whatever conflicts with this." (Cols. xxxvi.7–17)

Sedley (§4, pp. 263–272) provides an extended analysis of non-contestation in Epicurus, arguing that Antiochus of Ascalon's summary in Sextus (*M* VII.211–16) misrepresents Philodemus' own Epicurean contemporaries by conflating non-contestation (a method of *confirmation*) with sign-inference (a method of *discovery*).

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## V. THE CENTRAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTION: GENUINE KNOWLEDGE OR MERE PROBABILITY?

This is the deepest issue in the *De Signis*, and the texts give a remarkably clear answer.

## The Stoic Position: Empirical Inference Yields Only the "Convincing" (*Pithanon*)

Sedley (pp. 250–255) demonstrates through a careful reading of de Signis col. vii.26–38 that the Stoic Dionysius, while using the elimination method for strict logical inferences, explicitly assigns similarity-based and experience-based inferences to the class of the *pithanon* – the "convincing but fallible."[21] He quotes Dionysius:

> "...it is sufficient, concerning these things and concerning those which derive from experience, for us to be convinced in accordance with probability (*eulogia*), just as when we sail in summer we are convinced that we will arrive safely." (Col. vii.33–4)[22]

Sedley identifies this with the Stoic technical use of *pithanon* (convincing): not falsehood, and not worthless, but genuinely only *probable* – it "could be" wrong. Chrysippus used material implication rather than strict conditionals for astrological laws and sorites-type arguments precisely because they are *convincing but fallible*, not logically necessary (Sedley, pp. 252–255). The Stoic position therefore is:

- **A priori, contraposition-tested inferences**: yield genuine knowledge (*katalēpton*), necessity, certainty.
- **Empirical, similarity-based inferences**: yield only *pithanon* – convincing probability, not knowledge.

## The Epicurean Rebuttal: Properly Conducted Empirical Inference *Is* Knowledge

Philodemus explicitly and emphatically rejects the idea that analogical inference yields only probability. **Fragment 2** of the De Signis states (De Lacy translation, cited Essay V, p. 222):

> "One ought not stop with evident things but from them make inferences about the non-apparent, nor mistrust the things proved through them by analogy but **trust them just as one trusts the things from which the inference was made**."[23]

This is a strong claim about knowledge: sound analogical inference carries the same epistemic weight as direct perception. The Epicurean position rests on several interlocking commitments:

**1. Perceptions are unconditionally true.** All sensations, as such, are true – they faithfully present the appearances that really occur. Error arises only when *opinion* (doxa) is added by the mind to the raw perceptual data (De Lacy, Essay IV, pp. 183–184; Sext. *M* VII.203–4 = fr. 247 Usener).

**2. The inference, properly made, inherits this truth.** If perceptions are the infallible foundation, and the analogical inference is correctly built from them (with wide and varied observation, no conflicting appearances, correct identification of the relevant *qua*-clause), then the conclusion is **not merely probable but certain**. The *De Signis* insists on this throughout: the method of analogy "must be the one naturally fine method" (col. xxxvii; cf. De Lacy, Essay V, p. 217).

**3. Inconceivability is a criterion of necessity, not mere plausibility.** When it is genuinely inconceivable that Epicurus could be a man while Metrodorus is not, this is not a matter of probability – it is a matter of *necessity* grounded in the nature of humanity as empirically understood. The inconceivability criterion converts what might look like an inductive inference into a claim about necessity (col. xiv.17–27; De Lacy, Essay V, p. 218).

**4. Non-contestation (*ouk antimarturēsis*) is a sufficient condition for truth – not merely plausibility.** Sextus Empiricus (M VII.211–16) reports the Epicurean principle: "Verification (*epimarturēsis*) and lack of evidence to the contrary (*ouk antimarturēsis*) are the criteria of the true; lack of verification and evidence to the contrary are the criteria of the false."[24] Philodemus' contemporaries in the De Signis confirm this: they are "mistaken not to see that we ascertain that there is no obstacle resulting from appearances" (col. xxxvi.7–17). Non-contestation, combined with theoretical explanatory power, is sufficient for truth – not mere belief.

Sedley (pp. 269–271) argues that Epicurus' own usage shows non-contestation as a *confirmatory check* applied to theories that already have explanatory merit, sufficient to establish their truth (not just possibility).[25] The "multiple explanations" principle for celestial phenomena (where several non-contested explanations are all held true, perhaps in different worlds) is the exception, not the rule;

for basic physics – the existence of atoms and void – only one explanation is consistent with the full range of phenomena, and that explanation is *known*, not merely believed.

**5. The Stoics' own a priori claims are secretly grounded in empirical inference.** This is Philodemus' master argument: if analogical inference lacks necessity and certainty, then so does the Stoic elimination method, because the latter has no epistemic content that is not derived from the former. The Stoics cannot claim a privileged access to necessity without implicitly relying on the same empirical basis the Epicureans make explicit. "Since the Stoic position rests ultimately on induction from experience, if the method of analogy has no necessity or compulsion, the Stoic inference has none" (De Lacy, Essay V, p. 217).

## Qualification: Not All Inferences Are Equally Certain

While rejecting the Stoic demotion of all empirical inference to the merely probable, Philodemus does not claim that all analogical inferences are equally secure. The degree of certainty is proportionate to the quality of the evidence (col. xxvi.32–39):

- Inferences backed by uniform, widespread, varied observation, with no conflicting appearances and no alternative explanation = **certain** (e.g., the void argument; the mortality of men).
- Inferences backed by good but limited evidence, or where some variability exists = **probable in the sense of strongly warranted**, but subject to revision.
- For celestial phenomena, where multiple explanations each pass the non-contestation test, Epicurus accepts all as possibly true ("multiple explanations" principle) – here the honest answer is acknowledged uncertainty about which holds in our world.

The key distinction is between (a) the *epistemic status* of properly-made inferences (which can be genuinely certain) and (b) the *practical situation* where a given inquiry has not yet reached the conditions for certainty.

**Philodemus vs. the Stoic *Pithanon*: A Precise Summary**

| | Stoics | Philodemus/Epicureans |
|---|---|---|
| A priori/analytic inferences | Knowledge, certainty | Not independently valid; require empirical grounding |
| Similarity-based inferences | *Pithanon* (convincing, probable, fallible) | Genuine knowledge, if properly conducted |
| Experience-based generalizations | *Pithanon* only | Genuine knowledge (same test as for direct perception) |
| The elimination method | Primary; yields necessity | Derivative; borrows necessity from analogy |
| The similarity method | Invalid or at best *pithanon* | Primary; yields necessity via inconceivability |
| Knowledge of atoms, void | May use strict inference only | Established by analogy + non-contestation; genuinely true |

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## VI. DE LACY'S SUPPLEMENTARY ESSAYS: KEY ANALYSES

### Essay II: The Argument and Date of *De Signis* (pp. 156–164)

Provides the most complete structural overview of the treatise. Key finding: the text shows a "symmetrical sequence of objections and answers" (objections at ia–v.36, answers at xi.29–xix.4), then an interruption, then a second set of objections with answers (xix.9–xxvii.28), then the analysis of "pervasive errors" (Demetrius and the anonymous Epicurean, xxvii.28–xxxviii.22). This structure mirrors the pedagogical practice of Epicurean schools: first present the opponents' case in full, then give the comprehensive Epicurean reply.

### Essay III: The Sources of Epicurean Empiricism (pp. 165–182)

Traces Epicurean empiricism to its roots in Hippocratic medicine, Aristotelian natural science, and early Greek empirical crafts. Argues that Epicurean method, rather than being a novelty, generalizes a well-established empirical tradition in

the sciences. The Stoics, by contrast, generalized the rationalistic method of mathematics. This explains the depth and bitterness of the controversy: both schools were claiming to capture the legitimate foundations of science.

### Essay IV: Development of Epicurean Logic and Methodology (pp. 183–205)

Traces the development of Epicurean methodology from Epicurus through Metrodorus, Colotes, Polystratus, the Epicurean mathematicians, and Philodemus himself. Key contributions:

- **Epicurus' core theory of knowledge**: All perceptions true; error from opining (*doxazein*). The criteria of truth are perception (*aisthēsis*), preconception (*prolēpsis*), mental attention (*epibōlē*), and feeling (*pathos*). The extension to non-evident objects uses *epilogismos* (inferential reasoning from data) checked by *epimarturēsis* (attestation) and *ouk antimarturēsis* (non-contestation).
- **Classification of unperceivable things** (pp. 186): (a) altogether unperceivable (odd/even number of stars); (b) naturally unperceivable but knowable by inference (atoms, void); (c) temporarily unperceivable but potentially perceivable (distant objects, future events).
- **Philodemus' applications**: Uses empirical method in ethics (weighing pleasures and pains; *epilogizesthai* in moral guidance), rhetoric (conjectural art), religion (knowledge of gods by analogy with men). In all cases the method is the same: observation, analogy, inconceivability, non-contestation.

### Essay V: The Logical Controversies of Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics (pp. 206–227)

The most philosophically rich essay. Key sections:

**Stoic Semiotic (pp. 206–214):** The Stoic sign is formally defined as "the proposition in a sound conditional which is antecedent and reveals the conclusion" (*Pyrrh. Hyp.* ii.104). The sign-relation is a relation between *lekta* (meanings/propositions), not physical things. Validity requires *sunartēsis* (conjoining) or *anaskeuē* (contraposition). Stoic semiotic "requires that necessary truth must be a priori and analytic" (p. 211, citing De Lacy *op. cit.* p. 211; cf. Sedley, p. 247).

**The Epicurean Response (pp. 217–222):** Philodemus' fundamental claim is that "the necessary truths which the Stoics considered analytic and a priori are really established by induction from experience. The definitive or prescriptive level of analysis is secondary to the descriptive level, since the latter furnishes the material and the order from which the former is derived. Deductive logic is subsequent to inductive logic in order of development because it depends on the latter" (p. 221).[26]

**The Sceptic Position (pp. 223–227):** Sextus Empiricus occupies a distinct position: he accepts **admonitive signs** (*hypomnēstika sēmeia*, which remind us of co-observed regularities) but rejects **indicative signs** (*endeitika sēmeia*, which are supposed to reveal things by nature unperceivable).[27] His criticism of the Epicureans is not that their method is wrong, but that they overreach by using it to establish a confident account of atoms and void. Sextus aims at phenomenalism, not at positive knowledge of unperceivables. Philodemus' position is thus between Stoic rationalism and Sceptic phenomenalism: genuine empirical knowledge of the unperceived is possible, but only through properly conducted inductive inference, not through *a priori* deduction.

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## VII. SEDLEY'S ANALYSIS: DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Sedley's "On Signs" (1982) brings several important contributions beyond the De Lacy apparatus:

**1. Identification of the Stoic opponents** (pp. 240–241): Sedley argues that the opponents are Stoics of the mid-to-late second century B.C. (not the earlier Stoics described by Sextus).[28] He identifies the principal Stoic opponent "Dionysius" with Dionysius of Cyrene, a pupil of Diogenes of Babylon and Antipater of Tarsus. This means the debate in the *De Signis* reflects the state of Stoic theory of knowledge *after* Chrysippus, with modifications (e.g., use of the paraconditional "Since p, q" rather than the simple conditional "If p, q") that postdate Chrysippus (pp. 243).[29]

**2. The Elimination Method and *Sunartēsis*** (pp. 244–248): Sedley argues, against the received view (Bahnsch and others), that *anaskeuē* is not merely contraposition but something stricter: the test of Chrysippan *sunartēsis*, which obtains when the contradictory of the consequent *conflicts* with the antecedent – a much more demanding criterion than simple material implication.[30] The elimination method establishes connections that are necessarily knowable *a priori*, whether formally or analytically.

**3. The Stoic *Pithanon* and Its Scope** (pp. 250–255): Through careful reading of col. vii.26–38, Sedley identifies Dionysius' explicit concession that similarity-based and experience-based inferences belong to the *pithanon* – a class Chrysippus himself had designated for "convincing but fallible" propositions.[31] This is a technically precise Stoic concession with profound implications: the Stoics themselves admitted that empirical science cannot achieve logical necessity. Sedley traces this to Chrysippus' use of material implication (rather than strict conditionals) for astrological and sorites-type arguments.

**4. The Smoke/Void Two-Stage Analysis** (pp. 260–263): Sedley provides the clearest available explanation of why Philodemus sometimes treats "Since there is motion, there is void" as an elimination inference and sometimes as a similarity inference.[32] The two-stage analysis (similarity to establish the necessity; elimination to formalize it) dissolves the apparent inconsistency and shows that for the Epicureans the elimination method adds no independent epistemic force.

**5. Non-Contestation vs. Discovery** (pp. 263–272): Sedley argues that Antiochus of Ascalon (the likely source of the section on Epicurus in Sextus, *M* VII.203–16) misrepresented non-contestation by conflating it with sign-inference (*sēmeiōsis*).[33] Non-contestation is a method of *confirmation* for theories that already have explanatory merit; sign-inference is a method of *discovery*. Philodemus' contemporaries were "perfectly well aware of the purely confirmatory role of non-contestation" (p. 271, citing de Signis 36.7–17).

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## VIII. KEY TECHNICAL TERMS

| Greek Term | De Lacy Translation | Significance |
|---|---|---|
| *sēmeiōsis* | Sign-inference | The process of inferring from observed signs to unobserved facts |
| *homoiotēs* | Similarity, analogy | The ground of Epicurean inductive inference |
| *anaskeuē* / *anaskeue* | Elimination, contraposition | The Stoic method of testing conditionals |
| *idion sēmeion* | Particular sign | Sign that cannot exist without its signified |
| *koinon sēmeion* | Common sign | Sign that may or may not accompany its signified |
| *adianoeiston* | Inconceivability | The Epicurean criterion of necessity |
| *sunartēsis* | Conjoining / cohesion | Chrysippan criterion of conditional validity |
| *epilogismos* | Inductive reasoning / inferential reasoning | Mental process of drawing conclusions from empirical data |
| *epimarturēsis* | Attestation / verification | Positive confirmation of a belief by perception |
| *ouk antimarturēsis* | Non-contestation | Absence of conflicting evidence; Epicurean test for truth of non-evident beliefs |
| *pithanon* | Convincing / probable | Stoic category for fallible, non-necessary inference |
| *eulogon* | Reasonable, probable | That which has more chances of being true than false |
| *adēla* | Non-evident things | Things not accessible to direct perception |

| Greek Term | De Lacy Translation | Significance |
|---|---|---|
| *prolēpsis* | Preconception | Innate or naturally acquired general concept serving as a criterion |
| *hēi / kathō* | Insofar as / qua | Used to specify the relevant property in an inference; four meanings analyzed in cols. xxxiii–xxxvi |
| *kat' anaskeuen tropos* | Elimination method | Stoic-preferred mode of sign-inference |
| *kath' homoiotēta tropos* | Similarity method | Epicurean-preferred mode of sign-inference |

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## IX. SUMMARY OF PHILODEMUS' POSITION

Philodemus defends the following set of claims, which together constitute the Epicurean philosophy of knowledge:

1. **All perceptions are true** in the sense of faithfully presenting the appearance that occurs. Error arises only from additional opinion.
2. **Inference from perception, properly conducted, is genuine knowledge** – not merely probable. The properly-made analogical inference carries the same epistemic status as perception itself (Frag. 2).
3. **The criterion of inconceivability converts inductive inference into claims of necessity**. When it is genuinely inconceivable (on the basis of broad empirical observation) that the sign could exist without what it signifies, we have established a necessary connection.
4. **Non-contestation (*ouk antimarturēsis*) is a sufficient condition for truth** when combined with explanatory power. A theory that conflicts with no phenomenon and explains what needs explaining is genuinely true (for basic physics), not merely probably true.
5. **The elimination method is not independently valid** but derives whatever force it has from the prior work of the similarity method. Stoic deduction is epistemically downstream from Epicurean induction.

6. **The Stoic *pithanon* classification is rejected** for properly-conducted empirical inference. It may apply to careless or premature inferences; it does not apply to inference conducted with wide and varied observation, correct identification of relevant qualities, and confirmed by non-contestation.
7. **Degrees of certainty exist** within the class of warranted inferences: some inferences are more secure than others, depending on the uniformity and breadth of the evidence. But the existence of more and less secure inferences does not mean that the more secure ones are merely probable.
8. **The limits of knowledge are real**: some things (the parity of the stars) are genuinely unknowable; for celestial phenomena, multiple explanations may all be equally acceptable; for basic physics, uniquely determined truth is achievable.

In short, Philodemus' position is a robust empirical foundationalism: **the senses give us infallible access to appearances; properly-made inferences from appearances give us genuine, necessary knowledge of the unperceived world**. This is neither scepticism (knowledge is impossible) nor rationalism (knowledge requires a priori foundations). It is a demanding empiricism that claims genuine knowledge of atoms, void, and unperceived objects throughout the universe.

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## X. EXPANDED ANALYSIS: THE FOURFOLD MEANING OF *HĒI* / *KATHŌ* ("INSOFAR AS" / "QUA")

### Background and Stakes

The analysis of "insofar as" (*hēi*, *kathō*, or *kath' ho*) in cols. xxxiii.21–xxxvi.7 is one of the most technically demanding passages in the *De Signis*. It is presented as part of the anonymous Epicurean's response to the "pervasive errors" of those who attack analogy (De Lacy, Essay II, p. 161–162, pervasive error no. 10). The issue arises from a specific Stoic strategy. The Stoics had offered to "help" the Epicureans by reformulating their mortality argument:

- **Epicurean version**: "Since men within our experience are mortal, men outside our experience are mortal." – a straightforward similarity inference.

- **Stoic reformulation**: "Since men within our experience are mortal *insofar as they are men*, men everywhere are mortal." – now treated as passing the elimination test, because "mortal" is analytically contained in "man qua man."

Zeno of Sidon rejected this Stoic offer without much argument (col. xvi.29–xvii.11); Demetrius was cautiously ambivalent (col. xxix.4–16); but the anonymous Epicurean in the final section of the *De Signis* meets the Stoic challenge head-on. His strategy is to show that the phrase "insofar as" (*hēi*) is not univocal – it covers at least four distinct types of relationship – and that in every one of those four meanings, the necessary connection expressed must be established empirically, not *a priori* (Sedley, pp. 258–259).

### The Four Meanings (Cols. xxxiii.33–xxxiv.29)

The anonymous Epicurean distinguishes:

**Meaning 1: Necessary Concomitant (*symptōma*)** Example: "Men, *insofar as* they are men, are prone to disease and aging."

This expresses a property that accompanies membership in a class necessarily but is not part of the definition of the class. It is an empirical regularity, confirmed by broad and consistent observation across all known instances of the class. It cannot be known *a priori* that mortality and susceptibility to disease belong to humanity; this must be discovered by examining men and finding no exceptions. That the connection holds necessarily is established by the breadth and consistency of the observations, not by inspecting the concept of "man."

The Epicurean point: even if Dionysius is right that the "insofar as" formulation creates a necessary connection, the *source* of that necessity is empirical, not analytic.

**Meaning 2: Definition and Preconception (*prolēpsis*)** Example: "Man, *insofar as* he is man, is a rational animal."[34]

This appears to be the Stoic's best case – a definitional truth where the predicate is analytically contained in the subject. The anonymous Epicurean concedes that this *looks* like an a priori connection. But he insists that even definitional connections are empirically derived: preconceptions (*prolēpseis*) are formed through repeated experience, and what we include in our concept of "man" reflects what

we have learned about men empirically. The definition is not self-certifying; it is accountable to experience.

This move is consistent with the broader Epicurean philosophy of language: words refer primarily to perceivable objects; their meaning is fixed by empirical practice within a community, not by rational stipulation. An "empty" definition – one not grounded in observable properties – is simply meaningless (De Lacy, Essay IV, pp. 184–185; Epicurus, *Ep. Hdt.* 37, *Rat. Sent.* 37).

**Meaning 3: Accident (*symbebēkos*)** Example: "Man, *insofar as* he is man, [walks when he wishes]."[35]

This is a regular property of men that is nonetheless contingent: men sometimes walk, sometimes not. The "insofar as" here signals a genuine but non-necessary concomitant – something that holds for men as such but does not hold invariably. The Epicurean analysis: this too is established entirely by observation. There is no *a priori* reason why men should walk; this is simply what we find them doing. The "insofar as" does not generate necessity here; it merely specifies the class within which the observation is made.

This meaning is included to show that "insofar as" does not always carry necessity – a point the Stoics had assumed without examination. By acknowledging this meaning, Philodemus prevents any blanket claim that all "insofar as" premises are necessarily true.

**Meaning 4: Necessary Concomitant of a Property** Example: "[A man, *insofar as* he] is foolish, is utterly unhappy."

This picks out not a property of men as men, but a necessary consequence of one specific property. The connection between foolishness and unhappiness is necessary – it is inconceivable that a genuinely foolish person should be happy in the relevant sense. But this necessity is itself an empirical finding: we learn from extensive observation that foolishness invariably produces unhappiness. The "insofar as" here specifies the property that grounds the inference, not the species membership.

This meaning is particularly important for Epicurean ethics, where claims like "the pleasurable life is the good life" or "the wise man is always happy" function

as necessary connections discovered empirically through the nature of pleasure, pain, and human psychology.[36]

### The Epicurean Conclusion from All Four Meanings

The anonymous Epicurean's argument runs as follows (cols. xxxiv.29–xxxvi.7; Sedley, pp. 258–259; De Lacy, Essay II, p. 161):

1. All four uses of "insofar as" involve some kind of necessary connection (not just meanings 1 and 4; even the definitional meaning 2 and the apparently contingent meaning 3 have their own kinds of necessity).
2. None of these necessary connections is knowable *a priori*. Each must be established through painstaking empirical inquiry.
3. The Stoics assume that an "insofar as" premise automatically confers the elimination method on the inference that uses it. But this ignores the *source* of the "insofar as" connection – which is always, on examination, empirical.
4. Therefore: "In fact, establishing the necessary connection which 'insofar as' in all its senses marks can only be a painstaking empirical matter – even for apparently definitional properties like man's mortality" (col. xxxv.4–29, paraphrased by Sedley, p. 259).

### Significance: Empiricism vs. Rationalism

Sedley characterizes this as a "head-on confrontation between empiricism and rationalism" (p. 259), and the characterization is apt.[37] The anonymous Epicurean is not merely saying that the Stoics have used "insofar as" too quickly in one case; he is making a general claim about knowledge: **there is no class of necessary truths accessible to reason independently of experience**. The "insofar as" qualification can specify the basis of a necessary inference, but it cannot *create* that necessity or certify it from the armchair. Every instance of genuine necessity – whether definitional, property-based, or concomitant – is a discovery made through empirical inquiry and confirmed by the non-contestation of the resulting claim.

The implication for the mortality argument is clear: whether we say "men are mortal" (the Epicurean version) or "men are mortal *insofar as* they are men" (the Stoic reformulation), we are saying the same thing, and we know it by the same

means – extensive observation showing that no man has ever been found immortal, no appearance conflicts with the claim, and the claim holds across all the varied circumstances in which men appear. The Stoic formulation adds no epistemic gain; it merely disguises the empirical origin of the claim in formal-looking language.

### Connection to the Primary/Secondary Quality Distinction

The four meanings of "insofar as" connect directly to Philodemus' defense of Epicurean atomism (cols. xvii.37–xviii.16). He uses *hēi* and *kathō* to distinguish properties that belong to bodies *as bodies* (tangibility, resistance) from properties that belong to bodies under a specific further description (color, destructibility – which belong to perceptible bodies insofar as they have a nature "opposed to the corporeal and non-resistant," not insofar as they are bodies). The detailed analysis of "insofar as" in cols. xxxiii–xxxvi provides the conceptual toolkit for that earlier move: to make the right analogical inference you must identify the right "insofar as," and the right one is always identified empirically (De Lacy, Essay V, pp. 220–221).

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## XI. EXPANDED ANALYSIS: SEDLEY ON ANTIOCHUS AS THE SOURCE OF SEXTUS *M* VII.211–16

### The Problem

The passage at Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* VII.203–16 contains what looks like a detailed account of Epicurean methodology – specifically, Epicurus' use of *epimarturēsis* (attestation) and *ouk antimarturēsis* (non-contestation) as criteria of truth. This passage has long been regarded as a reliable guide to Epicurus' own approach to gaining knowledge, used by scholars to reconstruct what Epicurus meant by these terms. The standard attribution of the passage's source is to **Demetrius Lacon**, one of the Epicurean participants in the debate reported by Philodemus (Sedley, p. 264, following Natorp).

Sedley argues that this attribution is mistaken, and that the real source is more likely **Antiochus of Ascalon** – and that this matters greatly for understanding what the passage does and does not tell us about Epicurus.

### Sedley's Case for Antiochus as Source (Pp. 264–271)

**Step 1: The contextual argument.** The passage on Epicurus (M VII.203–16) is flanked on both sides by material securely identified as deriving from Antiochus' *Canonica* (a history of theories of knowledge).[38] The preceding section (M VII.141–89) is Antiochus' history of the Academy; Antiochus is cited by name at 162.[39] At 201–2, his words on Asclepiades are quoted verbatim from the *Canonica*. Following the Epicurus section (at 217–60) comes an account of Peripatetics and Stoics that Hirzel has identified as Antiochean on independent grounds (Sedley, pp. 265–266). The Epicurus section is thus sandwiched between Antiochean material on both sides, making it very likely that it too is Antiochean.

**Step 2: Antiochus' characteristics as a reporter.** Antiochus was notoriously "unscrupulous" (Sedley, p. 266) in his doxographical work, particularly when he had his own agenda (establishing the unity of the Platonic tradition from Plato through the Stoics). He habitually attributed contemporary philosophical terminology to earlier thinkers, as Sedley notes from the passage at M VII.141–4, where the account of Plato "seizes on the word *perilēptikos* in the *Timaeus* and scandalously equates it with the Stoic term *katalēptikos*" (p. 265).[40] When treating philosophers with whose views he was not closely familiar – and Antiochus was not an Epicurean – he was capable of significant misunderstanding.

**Step 3: The specific misrepresentation Antiochus makes.** Sedley's key argument (pp. 269–271) is that the Sextus passage misrepresents non-contestation by confusing it with sign-inference (*sēmeiōsis*).[41] In the passage, non-contestation is defined as "the following (*akolouthia*) from that which is apparent of the non-apparent thing posited and believed" – and the void inference is given as the example: if void does not exist, motion should not occur either, but motion is apparent, therefore void is confirmed.

The problem is that this makes non-contestation look like a *method of discovery*: the apparent thing (motion) leads us to the non-apparent thing (void). But Philodemus' Epicurean contemporaries, as Sedley demonstrates from the *De Signis* itself, are clear that non-contestation is a method of *confirmation*, not discovery. The void's existence is established by the similarity method (Stage 1: empirical observation that motion requires empty space); non-contestation then

*confirms* this result by showing that the positing of void does not conflict with any phenomenon, while the denial of void *does* conflict with the evident fact of motion (col. xxxvi.7–17).

Any Epicurean who actually participated in the *De Signis* debate – Zeno, Demetrius, Bromius, or the anonymous Epicurean – would, Sedley argues, "be horrified by the false emphasis with which this is done, particularly by the assumption that it is the inference from motion to void that in itself 'confirms' the existence of void" (p. 265).[42] The Sextus passage gets the *formal structure* right (void is established via the non-contestation of the denial of motion) but misrepresents *which stage of inquiry does the real epistemic work*.

**Step 4: Why Demetrius is not a good candidate.** The standard argument for Demetrius is that the void inference attributed to Epicurus in M VII.214 was also used by Demetrius (cited at M VIII.348). But Sedley notes this is weak evidence: all three Epicureans in the *De Signis* use the void inference (Sedley, p. 264 n. 60). Moreover, the Sextus passage's misrepresentation is precisely the kind of error a non-combatant observer (Antiochus) would make when reading Epicurean material – "a passage like de Signis 12.1–14 into supposing the void inference to rely purely on the elimination method, provided that he did not scrutinise the broader context too carefully" (p. 265).[43] Demetrius, as an actual participant in the debate, would never have made this error.

**Step 5: Antiochus' specific confusion.** Antiochus, Sedley argues (p. 271), "clearly started with some general information about Epicurus' terminology and usage, and, in characteristically unhistorical fashion, delved into contemporary Epicurean tracts for further elucidation."[44] Finding there the term *sēmeiōsis* prominently discussed, and not finding the crucial term "non-contestation" in that context, he "mistakenly identified it with the current Epicurean preoccupation *sēmeiōsis*, of which he had achieved a rather superficial understanding. He thus confused a method of confirmation with a method of discovery."

### What This Means for Reading the Sextus Passage

If Sedley's argument is correct, the passage at M VII.211–16 cannot be treated as a direct transcript of Epicurean methodology. Specifically:

1. The claim that non-contestation is "the following of the non-apparent from the apparent" overstates the role of the formal inference step. For the Epicureans, the formal step "Since there is motion, there is void" is not in itself the epistemic achievement – the empirical establishment of the motion-void connection through the similarity method is.[45]
2. The passage's picture of non-contestation as the primary tool for discovering non-evident truths may reflect Antiochus projecting his own rationalistic leanings onto Epicurean methodology, assimilating it to a kind of *a priori* deduction from evident premises.
3. The passage does, however, preserve a genuine Epicurean distinction between things verifiable by direct perception (*epimarturēsis*) and things confirmed by absence of conflicting evidence (*ouk antimarturēsis*). This division is authentic; what Antiochus gets wrong is the *relation* of non-contestation to sign-inference.

### What Epicurean Non-Contestation Actually Does

Drawing on Epicurus' own letters and on the *De Signis*, Sedley reconstructs the proper role of non-contestation (pp. 267–272):[46]

**For basic physics (atoms, void):** Non-contestation is a confirmatory check applied to theories that already have explanatory power. The void's existence is posited to explain motion; non-contestation then confirms that this posit conflicts with no observable phenomenon, while the denial of void conflicts with the evident fact of motion. The result is genuine truth – not mere probability – because only one explanation is consistent with the full range of phenomena.

**For celestial phenomena:** Multiple explanations (all consistent with visible analogues in terrestrial experience) may each pass the non-contestation test. In this case, Epicurus accepts all of them as possibly true – probably in different worlds, given the infinity of the universe. Here the honest result is acknowledged plurality, not certainty. This is the "multiple explanations" principle of the *Letter to Py-*

*thocles*, and it is explicitly grounded in the availability of multiple non-contested alternatives, not in any deficiency of the method.

**The key asymmetry:** Contestation (a belief that conflicts with phenomena) *proves falsehood*. Non-contestation (a belief that conflicts with nothing) is a *sufficient condition for truth* when combined with explanatory power and the uniqueness of the non-contested explanation. This asymmetry between verification and falsification is, Sedley notes (p. 271), a genuine and important insight – Epicurus "can be congratulated on his insight that scientific theories lend themselves to falsification more readily than to verification" – and Antiochus' conflation of non-contestation with discovery obscures it.[47]

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## XII. EXPANDED ANALYSIS: THE THREE-WAY CONTROVERSY – STOICS, EPICUREANS, AND SCEPTICS

### Introduction: Why the Three-Way Comparison Matters

The *De Signis* itself focuses on the Stoic-Epicurean controversy, but De Lacy's Essay V (pp. 223–230) and Sedley's broader analysis place the debate within a larger three-way conversation that includes the Empirical Sceptics, above all Sextus Empiricus.[48] Understanding where the Sceptics stand illuminates both the Stoic and Epicurean positions by contrast, and clarifies what is genuinely at stake in the question of whether empirical inference can yield knowledge or only probability.

### The Sceptic Position: Admonitive Signs Only

Sextus Empiricus accepts the following from the shared Hellenistic framework: all three schools divide things into the apparent (*phainomena*) and the non-apparent (*adēla*), and all agree that only the apparent needs no inference. Where they diverge is on whether the non-apparent can be known at all, and if so, by what means.

Sextus differentiates **two kinds of signs** corresponding to two sub-classes of the non-apparent (*Adv. Math.* VIII.152–158; *Pyrrh. Hyp.* II.100–101; De Lacy, Essay V, pp. 212–213, 223–224):

**1. The admonitive sign (*hypomnēstikon sēmeion*):** A sign that has been *observed together with* what it signifies in a clear situation, and subsequently serves as a reminder when the thing signified is not currently apparent. The standard example: smoke as the sign of fire, a scar as the sign of a past wound. The admonitive sign works by memory and association: having seen smoke and fire together before, smoke now reminds us of fire.

Sextus *accepts* admonitive signs as useful and legitimate. Without them, practical life (*bios*) would be impossible – skippers, farmers, and hunters all rely on them, as do animals (the hunting dog reads the track as a sign of the quarry). Their legitimacy does not depend on any philosophical theory; they are part of how living things navigate the world.

Crucially, Sextus does *not* claim that admonitive signs give us knowledge of fire – only that they lead us to *expect* fire. The relation between smoke and fire is a constant conjunction observed in experience; it does not assert a necessary connection, a causal relation, or anything that goes beyond the phenomenal level.

**2. The indicative sign (*endeiktikon sēmeion*):** A sign that, "from its own nature and constitution, all but saying the word, indicates the thing of which it is indicative" (*Adv. Math.* VIII.154).[49] The indicative sign designates things that are *by nature unperceivable* – atoms, the void, the soul, pores in the flesh. It cannot have been observed together with what it signifies, since the thing signified is in principle inaccessible to perception. Its meaning must therefore be knowable *a priori* – or at least independently of any co-observation with what it signifies.

Sextus *rejects* indicative signs entirely. They are the invention of "dogmatic philosophers and rational physicians" (*Adv. Math.* VIII.156–158), who supposed they could provide knowledge of what is by nature beyond experience.[50] Sextus' arguments against them are numerous and various (De Lacy, Essay V, pp. 224–226):

- A sign involves a *relation* between two things; you cannot know a relation unless you have apprehended both relata – but if both are apparent, no infer-

ence is needed; if one is by nature unperceivable, the relation cannot be established (*Adv. Math.* VIII.163–165, 171–175).

- Philosophers disagree about whether signs are apprehended by sense-perception or thought. What is contested is thereby obscure; what is obscure requires another sign to clarify it; this generates an infinite regress (*ibid.* 176–182).
- The Stoic theory that signs are *propositions* (lekta) confuses the logical level with the phenomenal level. Practical sign-users – sailors, hunters, animals – do not form propositions; yet they use signs expertly. Therefore the Stoic propositional analysis is wrong (*ibid.* 269–271). (De Lacy, Essay V, p. 226, notes that the hunting dog does not say "If this is the track, the animal is over there.")
- If a conditional is sound only when both protasis (the sign) and apodosis (the thing signified) are true, and the apodosis is non-apparent, we cannot determine the conditional's soundness without already knowing what we are trying to learn (*ibid.* 266–268).

### Sextus' Critique of the Epicureans Specifically

While the Stoics are Sextus' "arch opponents" (De Lacy, Essay V, p. 223), he also criticizes the Epicureans – not for their method, but for their *conclusions*. The Epicureans use a method (similarity-based inference confirmed by non-contestation) that Sextus regards as fine for practical purposes, but then extend it to establish a confident account of atoms and void. This is precisely where, for Sextus, they overreach.

Sextus' specific charge against inductive inference (relevant to the Epicurean position on analogy):

> Induction from particulars to universals requires either examining all particulars (impossible, since their number is indefinitely large) or examining only some (insufficient, since unexamined ones might contradict the universal). (*Pyrrh. Hyp.* II.204; De Lacy, Essay V, p. 227)

This is essentially a version of the Stoic objection that Philodemus addresses at cols. xx.35–xxi.3 (not necessary to examine *all* cases; sufficient to examine many homogeneous and varied ones). Sextus presses harder: any extrapolation beyond

examined cases is unjustified. He compares investigators of the non-evident to "persons aiming at a target in the dark – it is likely that someone will hit it, but there is no way of knowing who it is" (*Adv. Math.* VIII.325; De Lacy, Essay V, p. 227). In other words, even if the Epicureans happen to be right about atoms and void, they cannot know that they are right.

### Sextus' Alternative: Phenomenalism and the Practical Arts

Rejecting both Stoic rationalism and Epicurean empirical dogmatism, Sextus advocates a **practical phenomenalism** (De Lacy, Essay V, pp. 228–230):

The arts are legitimate precisely because they do not claim knowledge of the hidden nature of things. They build their teachings from "things repeatedly observed or reported" (*Adv. Math.* VIII.291); their practitioners make predictions on the basis of admonitive signs – signs grounded purely in observed co-occurrence.[51] Navigation, empirical medicine, even reading and writing – all are legitimate arts operating within the level of appearances.

The crucial limitation: none of these arts "permit the person trained in an art to make universally valid pronouncements about the hidden nature of things" (De Lacy, Essay V, p. 228). They give guidance for practical action; they do not give knowledge of causes or of the *nature* of things.

De Lacy compares Sextus' position to **positivism** (Essay V, pp. 228–230): he combines a negative scepticism about knowledge of what reality fundamentally is with positive empiricism about phenomena. He does not say the *adēla* are unknowable in a strong deep sense about the nature of reality (unlike the negative Sceptics who assert even this would be dogmatic); he simply follows appearances and suspends judgment about what lies behind them. "The laws" he recognizes are not absolute causal laws but empirical regularities subject to revision.

### The Three Positions Compared

| Question | Stoics | Epicureans (Philodemus) | Sceptics (Sextus) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Can non-evident things be known? | Yes – by a priori, analytic inference via contraposition | Yes – by properly-conducted empirical | No – suspension of judgment; only |

| Question | Stoics | Epicureans (Philodemus) | Sceptics (Sextus) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | analogy + non-contestation | appearances guide practice |
| What kind of sign reveals the non-evident? | Indicative (*endeiktikon*): reveals by its own nature | Particular (*idion*): established empirically through inconceivability | Only admonitive (*hypomnēstikon*): reminds of co-observed regularities |
| What is the status of similarity-based inference? | *Pithanon* only: convincing but fallible | Genuine knowledge when properly conducted | Useful practically; not knowledge of hidden things |
| Is there necessary connection between sign and signified? | Yes – analytic and a priori | Yes – but empirically established | No – only constant conjunction; necessity is not claimed |
| Role of induction/ analogy | Insufficient for knowledge; yields at best *pithanon* | Primary method for knowledge of non-evident | Practically useful; epistemically limited to phenomenal level |
| Status of atoms, void, gods | Knowable via strict inference from concepts | Genuinely known via analogy + non-contestation | Not knowable; suspension of judgment |
| Relationship of formal deduction to experience | Primary; experience at best confirms formal truths | Derivative; all formal truths grounded in experience | Irrelevant to practical life; practically replaced by admonitive signs |
| Goal of the theory of signs | Establish a complete science grounded in a priori necessity | Establish empirical knowledge of nature, including physics | Practical guidance without any commitment about the nature of reality |

## The Deep Difference between Epicureans and Sceptics

The Sceptics and Epicureans share important methodological ground: both are empiricists; both reject Stoic a priori necessity as the standard for legitimate inference; both ground their practice in appearances. But they differ on a fundamental question: **whether properly-conducted inference from appearances can establish genuine truths about non-apparent things**.

For Sextus, the answer is no – not because such truths do not exist, but because we have no way to verify that our inferences have reached them. Any inference that goes beyond observed co-occurrence claims more than experience can certify, and the multiplicity of conflicting philosophical theories about non-evident things proves that no such inference commands rational assent.

For Philodemus, the answer is yes – provided the inference is wide enough (many homogeneous and varied appearances), identifies the right *qua*-property, is checked against no conflicting appearance, and reaches a conclusion that is the unique explanation consistent with all known phenomena. When these conditions are met, the inference yields knowledge – not merely belief – and the resulting claim carries the same epistemic authority as direct perception.

The Sceptic challenges Philodemus on exactly this: he cannot be certain that his conditions have been met, cannot be certain that no unexamined case conflicts, cannot be certain that his "insofar as" is the right one. Philodemus' response, implicit throughout the *De Signis*, is that these challenges apply equally to any claim to knowledge – including the claim that we cannot know the non-evident – and that the Sceptic's own practical use of admonitive signs already implicitly commits him to more than mere phenomenalism. The practical craftsman who reads smoke as a sign of fire is making an inference that goes beyond the observed case; the question is only how far such inferences can legitimately extend.

### The Sceptics' Asymmetric Relationship to the Two Dogmatic Schools

De Lacy observes (Essay V, p. 223) that "though Sextus attacks both Epicureans and Stoics, he considers the Stoics his arch opponents." This asymmetry is philosophically significant. Sextus' method is, in its foundations, much closer to the Epicurean than to the Stoic. He accepts:

- The primacy of appearances as the basis of all legitimate inquiry
- The illegitimacy of purely a priori inference
- The practical usefulness of sign-based reasoning grounded in observed regularities
- The critique of Stoic conceptualism (signs as *lekta*)

What he rejects is only the Epicurean *extension* of empirical method to claim genuine knowledge of non-apparent things. In this sense, the *De Signis* debate, read alongside Sextus, presents a spectrum rather than a binary:

- **Stoics**: a priori deduction → necessity → knowledge of the non-apparent (but only by analytic inference)
- **Epicureans**: empirical analogy → necessity (via inconceivability) → genuine knowledge of atoms, void, nature (but the necessity is empirically grounded)
- **Sceptics**: empirical observation → constant conjunction → practical guidance only (no claim to knowledge of the non-apparent; suspension of judgment)

Philodemus occupies the center of this spectrum – more epistemically ambitious than the Sceptics, but grounding his ambitions in experience rather than a priori reason. The *De Signis* is, among other things, an argument that this middle position is not merely a compromise but is epistemically superior to both extremes: more faithful to how we actually learn about the world than Stoic rationalism, and more intellectually honest about what properly-conducted empirical inquiry achieves than Sceptical suspension of judgment.

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## XIII. CONCLUSION: THE WORLD WE EXPERIENCE IS THE ONLY REAL WORLD

### The Central Epicurean Claim and Why It Matters

The material gathered in this document – from the criteria of truth in the *Kanon* to the *De Signis* debate, from the non-reductionist account of reality to the refutation of determinism – converges on a single proposition of the greatest philosophical importance: **the world given to us in experience is not a pale reflection, imperfect copy, or pragmatically useful appearance of some deeper or truer reality behind it. It is the only real world there is.**

This is a claim of extraordinary scope. It was held by Epicurus clearly and systematically, defended and elaborated by his school through five centuries of philosophical controversy, and has been recognized as uniquely penetrating by

perhaps the sharpest philosophical diagnostician of the Western tradition's pathologies, Friedrich Nietzsche. Understanding what Epicurus meant, what he was arguing against, and why his arguments succeeded is the task of this final section.

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## The "True World" Tradition: What Epicurus Opposed

The history of Western philosophy before Epicurus – and for two millennia after him – is in large part the history of what Nietzsche, in *Twilight of the Idols* ("How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable," 1888), anatomizes as the doctrine of two worlds: a phenomenal world of ordinary experience, which is somehow deficient, deceptive, or merely apparent, and a "true world" accessible (if at all) only to the right kind of rational, mathematical, or spiritual cognition. Nietzsche traces this doctrine through six historical stages culminating in its final self-destruction. But its roots go back to the thinkers Epicurus explicitly took as his targets.

**Pythagoras** initiated the tradition that reality is fundamentally mathematical – that the true nature of things is number, proportion, and harmonic relation, accessible to reason rather than sense. The phenomenal world of colours, textures, and experienced qualities was, for the Pythagoreans, the outer garment of a mathematical reality that sense-perception could not directly grasp. This is the first version of the "true world": a rational-mathematical structure hidden behind the appearances.

**Socrates** deepened the divide by insisting that genuine knowledge (*epistēmē*) must be of the eternal, unchanging, and perfectly definable – and that nothing given in sense-experience meets this standard. The crafts, the particular beautiful things we see, the changing events we witness – none of these could be known in the strict sense because they admit of exceptions, change, and imperfection. True knowledge requires a different object: the universal, the definitional, the invariant.

**Plato** completed the philosophical architecture of this tradition. The Forms – the Form of Beauty itself, the Form of Justice itself, the Form of the Good beyond all being – are the true existents, eternal, unchanging, accessible to philo-

sophical reason. The world of experience is a world of *becoming* rather than *being*, of shadows and imperfect copies rather than originals. The prisoners in the cave mistake the shadows on the wall for reality; the philosopher who has ascended to the sunlight of the Good returns to find that his former companions cannot follow him. The phenomenal world is not merely less than the true world; it actively misleads. The senses are unreliable guides; the body is an obstacle to knowledge; only the purified rational intellect, freed from bodily distraction, can achieve genuine understanding.

**Aristotle** is more moderate – he accepts that knowledge begins with perception and that the sensible world is fully real – but he still maintains a hierarchy of cognitive achievement in which the highest knowledge (*nous*, the intuitive grasp of first principles) apprehends eternal essences that transcend the particular sensible instances. Substance has form and matter; what is genuinely intelligible is the form, the universal, the essential structure. The accidents – the contingent, variable, individual features that distinguish this particular human from that one – are epistemically secondary, real but not the proper objects of science (*epistēmē*). And the Prime Mover, pure form without matter, pure actuality without potentiality, is the ultimate object of philosophical contemplation: a "true world" beyond the changing phenomenal one, though Aristotle reaches it by different means than Plato.

**Democritus** represents a different path to the same conclusion. His atomism is genuinely bottom-up: atoms and void are the only truly real things (*etēi*), and the colours, sounds, tastes, and textures of experience are merely conventional (*nomōi*) – constructions placed by the experiencing organism on atomic aggregates that in themselves have none of these properties. The result is a "true world" of a uniquely modern kind: the true world is the colourless, soundless, tasteless world of physics, and the vivid phenomenal world of everyday experience is, in the most literal sense, not real. This is eliminative materialism avant la lettre – and as Sedley has shown, it was precisely because Epicurus recognized the sceptical and deterministic implications of this position that he so forcefully rejected it.

The pattern across all five thinkers is the same: there is a distinction between the world as experienced and the world as it truly is, and genuine knowledge is

knowledge of the latter, not the former. The experienced world is variously characterized as shadow, appearance, convention, becoming, or atomic construction – but in every case it is epistemically and ontologically subordinate to the true world that underlies or transcends it.

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**Nietzsche's Diagnosis**

Nietzsche's "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" in *Twilight of the Idols* is the sharpest philosophical analysis of this tradition's internal logic. He traces six stages:

1. **Plato**: The true world is attainable – for the wise man, the philosopher who lives in it and *is* it.
2. **Christianity**: The true world is unattainable now, but promised to the virtuous – a reward deferred to the afterlife.
3. **Kant**: The true world is unattainable and undemonstrable, but a moral postulate, a regulative ideal – the noumenal world behind the phenomenal.
4. **Positivism**: The true world is unknown, unknowable, and therefore useless – but the idea persists as an obligation and a reproach.
5. The true world is abolished – but since it was posited in opposition to the "apparent world," that distinction collapses with it.
6. With the "true world" we have also abolished the *apparent* world. **What remains? The world. Just the world, this world.**

Nietzsche's analysis is devastating precisely because it is internal to the tradition's own logic. The "true world" began as an achievement of the wise, became progressively more inaccessible, then unknowable, then superfluous, and finally recognized as a self-contradictory fiction. And when it is abolished, the "apparent world" – the only world we ever had – turns out to be the only world there is. The "apparent" world becomes the *real* world: this world, our world, the world of experience.

Nietzsche makes the dimension relevant to knowledge explicit in the companion section "Reason in Philosophy," where he identifies the source of the "true world" delusion in the philosophers' **prejudice against change, becoming, and**

**the testimony of the senses**. The senses, Nietzsche argues, do not deceive: they report faithfully. The deception comes when reason interposes the categories of *being*, *substance*, and *unity* and transforms the report of the senses into something it was not. "Where our ignorance really begins, at that point from which we can see no further, we set a word; for instance, the word 'I,' the word 'do,' the word 'suffer'–these concepts may be the horizon lines of our knowledge, but they are not 'truths.'"[52] The philosopher's demand that reality must *be* – must be permanent, identical, classifiable – is a *moral* demand masquerading as a logical one; and it is this demand that generates the "true world" as its shadow.

Heraclitus alone, Nietzsche notes, withstood the prejudice: he was right that the senses do not lie, that the world of becoming is the real world, that the demand for permanence and being is a falsification. But Heraclitus' insight was immediately overwhelmed by the Eleatics and then by Plato, and philosophy went off down the wrong road for two millennia.

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## Epicurus: The Philosopher Who Got It Right

What is philosophically striking – and what Nietzsche himself recognized, with his warm and frequent appreciation for Epicurus – is that **Epicurus, two centuries before Christianity and twenty-two centuries before Nietzsche, had already arrived at the correct position: the world we experience is the only real world, and the senses are its reliable reporters.**

Every element of the Epicurean edifice documented in this work converges on this conclusion:

**The Criteria of Truth.** Epicurus' *Kanon* establishes that sensation (*aisthēsis*), preconception (*prolēpsis*), and feeling (*pathos*) are the criteria of truth – the only sources of genuine epistemic authority. Not Platonic recollection, not Aristotelian nous grasping eternal essences, not Stoic rational certainty derived from the *logos* – but the direct deliverances of perception and feeling. The world is known through what it does to us, not through what reason dictates it must be.

**All Sensations Are True.** Epicurus' insistence that all perceptions are true – even those that seem to conflict – is not a naïve failure to recognize illusion. It is the principled refusal to posit a "true" world behind the phenomenal one to

which the senses fail to give access. Error arises not in the senses but in the *opinions* we add to what the senses report. The senses cannot be wrong about what they present; they can only be misinterpreted. This is exactly Nietzsche's point: the senses do not deceive; it is reason's imposition of its categories on their deliverances that generates falsehood.

**Anti-Reductionism: The Phenomenal World Is Genuinely Real.** Sedley's analysis of Epicurean anti-reductionism shows that Epicurus deliberately rejected the Democritean move of dismissing phenomenal properties as conventional constructions on an atomic substrate that lacks them. Colours, flavours, pleasures, pains, mental states – these are not "merely apparent" or "merely conventional." They are genuinely real properties of genuinely real phenomenal objects. The "true world" of Democritus – the colourless, feelingless, meaningless world of atoms in void – is not more real than the world we experience; it is the *causal* basis of that world, which is a different claim. The phenomenal world is real at its own level of description, and no reduction to the atomic level eliminates its reality.

**Empirical Inference Reaches the Genuinely Real.** The *De Signis* establishes that properly-conducted analogical inference from phenomenal experience gives genuine knowledge of non-apparent reality – of atoms, void, gods, and the structure of nature. This is not knowledge of a "true world" inaccessible to experience; it is knowledge *derived from* experience of the structure underlying experience. The analogical method keeps the connection to experience intact at every step: what we infer must be consistent with what we observe, and the validity of the inference is established through the breadth and consistency of the observational base. There is no Platonic flight from the cave to a sunlit realm beyond; there is only a more careful and extended reading of what the cave's interior already contains.

**The Self Is Real and Genuinely Knows.** The refutation of mechanistic determinism establishes that the autonomous self – the knowing, reasoning, deliberating subject – is a genuinely real emergent entity whose acts of reasoning carry genuine weight as knowledge. If mechanism were true and all "reasoning" were merely the mechanical output of atomic collisions, there would be no knower capable of genuine epistemic achievements. The anti-reductionist account of the

self is thus the precondition in the nature of reality for the entire project of establishing how knowledge works. Knowledge is possible because the knower is real.

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## What Epicurus Refuted in Anticipation

The force of the Epicurean position lies not only in its internal coherence but in how completely it anticipates and forecloses the standard moves of the "true world" tradition over the following two millennia. Each of the major post-Epicurean positions in the idealist and sceptical traditions runs directly into objections that Epicurus either explicitly stated or that follow immediately from his principles.

**Against Platonic Forms and all claims to knowledge of an eternal intelligible world:** The only things that exist are bodies, void, and their properties. There are no separate eternal Platonic entities; the concept of a "Form" that is more real than any perceptible instantiation of it violates the fundamental Epicurean principle that *per se* existents are bodies and void, and that all other things are properties of these. A Form that exists nowhere in space, has no properties detectable by the senses, and is accessible only to purified rational intellect is, by Epicurean standards, an empty word – and empty words are not knowledge.

**Against Cartesian mind-body dualism and the veil of ideas:** The Epicurean empiricist is committed to direct realism about perception: the senses give us the phenomenal world directly, not mediately through private mental representations that may or may not correspond to an external reality. There is no "veil of ideas" between the perceiver and the world, because the perceiver *is* part of the world – a complex emergent entity constituted by atoms but genuinely real at the phenomenal level. The Cartesian sceptical challenge ("how do I know my perceptions correspond to reality?") does not arise within the Epicurean framework, because there is no gap between the phenomenal world and the "real" world for it to exploit.

**Against Kantian noumena and the thing-in-itself:** Kant's insistence that there is a "thing in itself" behind the phenomenal world – real but forever unknowable, beyond the reach of any possible experience – is precisely the "true world"

move that Epicurus rejects at its source. For Epicurus, what exists is what can, in principle, make a difference to experience: bodies whose causal effects on other bodies (including perceivers) are detectable either directly or by analogical inference. A "thing in itself" that makes no causal difference to any possible experience is, for the Epicurean, nothing at all – or at most an empty name for our ignorance.

**Against Berkeleyan idealism ("to be is to be perceived"):** For Berkeley, the phenomenal world is all there is – but it is constituted by minds and their ideas rather than by mind-independent physical objects.[53] For Epicurus, the phenomenal world is all there is – but it is constituted by genuinely mind-independent physical bodies and their properties. Berkeley's move to dissolve the external world into mental contents is, from the Epicurean standpoint, a solution to a non-problem: it inherits the Cartesian framing in which we are trapped behind a veil of perception and uses idealism to collapse the distance – but the distance should never have been posited in the first place. The Epicurean realist has no need of Berkeley's radical solution because he never accepted the sceptical problem it is designed to solve.

**Against Hegelian Absolute Idealism:** Hegel's "Absolute" – the self-knowing Idea that reveals itself through the dialectical unfolding of nature and history – is, in Nietzschean and Epicurean terms, simply the Platonic Form of the Good in dynamic dress. The claim that ordinary phenomenal reality is a manifestation of a deeper rational-spiritual structure that transcends it in every instance is the "true world" doctrine at its most ambitious and most obscure. Epicurus' response is direct: the only things that exist are bodies, void, and their properties; every other entity is either reducible to these or it is a word without a referent.

**Against modern scientific eliminativism and the "disenchanted world":** The claim that the "real" world is the world of physics and that phenomenal properties like colours, consciousness, and value are mere epiphenomena or eliminable fictions is simply Democritean reductionism in modern dress – and Epicurus has already refuted it. The genuinely radical insight of Epicurean anti-reductionism is that atomism (or any physical theory) gives us the causal story without giving us the whole story. That physical processes cause phenomenal properties does not mean physical processes *are* those properties or that those properties are

unreal. The eliminativist has confused causal explanation with the claim that higher-level things are nothing but their lower-level causes.

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## Nietzsche, Epicurus, and the One World

Nietzsche's appreciation for Epicurus is not incidental. He returns to Epicurus repeatedly across his works – in *The Gay Science*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Twilight of the Idols*, the *Nachlass* – and consistently treats him as the one ancient philosopher who came closest to the correct therapeutic orientation – acceptance of this world, this life, these senses – and the correct understanding of knowledge:: acceptance of this world, this life, these senses; refusal of otherworldly consolations and of the demand that reality be other than it appears.

In the sixth stage of "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable," Nietzsche writes: "The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one."[54] This is the Epicurean point formulated with Nietzschean precision. Once you give up the "true world" – once you recognize that there is no Platonic realm of Forms, no noumenal substrate, no atomic level that is more real than the phenomenal level – the phenomenal world is no longer "apparent." It is just: **the world**.

This is where Epicurus stands, and where – two millennia early – he planted his flag. His *Kanon* is not a theory of how we access the "apparent" world given that the "true" world is beyond us. It is a theory of how we access **the world** – the only one there is – through the reliable faculties of sensation, preconception, and feeling, extended by analogical inference to the unobserved but causally efficacious structure that underlies and explains what we experience directly.

The phenomenal world is not the shadow of the true world. **It is the true world.** And Epicurus knew this, argued for it, and built an entire philosophical system on it – a system in which knowledge is possible, the senses are trustworthy, the self is real, and the unobserved structure of nature is genuinely knowable through properly-conducted empirical inference. The debates documented in Philodemus' *De Signis*, the account of reality that underlies Epicur-

ean anti-reductionism, the refutation of mechanistic determinism – all of these are facets of this single, coherent, and deeply correct philosophical vision.

That Nietzsche reached the same vision by destroying two thousand years of accumulated philosophical misdirection, while Epicurus held it clearly from the start, is perhaps the most powerful testimony to the originality and philosophical penetration of Classical Epicurean thought.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Two Roads But One Dead End - Why the Epicurean Approach to Knowledge Is Superior to the Stoic

Both Epicurus and the Stoics claimed that genuine knowledge of the world is possible. In this they stand together against the Academic and Pyrrhonian Skeptics, who denied that certainty could be achieved at all. To that extent, both schools are what ancient philosophers called *dogmatists* — those who maintained positive doctrines about the nature of reality and the possibility of knowing it.

But the agreement ends there. What looks like a shared commitment to knowledge is, on examination, a profound disagreement about the very foundations of knowledge — what it is, where it comes from, and who can have it. The Epicurean approach is grounded in the natural faculties that nature herself provides to every living creature from birth. The Stoic approach builds an artificial epistemological apparatus that ultimately reserves genuine knowledge for a theoretical "sage" so rare that Chrysippus reportedly said one was harder to find than a phoenix. These are not two equally valid roads to the same destination. One of them leads to a liberating philosophy accessible to all; the other leads to an impossible standard that condemns ordinary people to permanent epistemological second-class status.

The differences run deep. They touch on the nature of sensation, the location of error, the role of formal logic in inquiry, and ultimately the question of what kind of entity the human mind is and how it relates to the world. This article examines those differences, drawing on the primary ancient sources — the letters of Epicurus, the fragments preserved by Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus, and Cicero's extensive engagement with both schools — and on the most

important modern scholarship, particularly the work of David Sedley and Norman DeWitt.

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## The Starting Point: Knowledge Grounded in Nature vs. Knowledge Reserved for the Sage

Both Epicurus and the Stoics held that the human mind is genuinely capable of attaining knowledge of the world — not merely plausible opinion, not merely pragmatically useful belief, but genuine contact with truth. This distinguishes both schools from the Academic tradition initiated by Arcesilaus and from the Pyrrhonian tradition systematized by Sextus Empiricus, both of which maintained that certainty is unattainable and that the appropriate response is universal suspension of judgment.

Epicurus's case for the achievability of knowledge begins from nature itself, and its argument rests on the evidence of experience, not on academic dialectic:

> If you fight against all your sensations, you will have no standard to which to refer, and thus no means of judging even those sensations which you claim are false. (*Principal Doctrine* 23)[1]

The argument is not merely epistemological but practical: without reliable knowledge, the entire Epicurean project of freeing human beings from groundless fear is impossible. You cannot demonstrate that the fear of death is groundless if you cannot know anything about what death is. You cannot demonstrate that the gods do not punish human beings if you cannot know anything about the nature of the gods. Knowledge is not an abstract philosophical luxury for Epicurus; it is the precondition for a liberated life. And crucially, the criteria that ground knowledge are not the product of philosophical training — they are the natural faculties that nature herself provides to every living creature. *You were born with the tools for knowing.* Philosophy's task is to prevent false opinion from corrupting them.

The Stoics were also insistent on the achievability of knowledge, and invested enormous philosophical energy in defending it against the Academic skeptics who attacked it. But here the critical difference appears. The Stoics were not con-

tent to ground knowledge in the natural faculties provided to all: they constructed an elaborate apparatus of rational assent, cognitive impressions, and trained discrimination that culminated in a theoretical sage whose knowledge was genuinely attainable by almost no one. The Stoic sage who possesses genuine knowledge (*epistēmē*) is a figure so perfect that Chrysippus reportedly acknowledged sages were harder to find than the phoenix. This is not a small qualification. It means that for the Stoics, genuine knowledge is practically unavailable to ordinary people, who are at constant risk of false assent and can at best aspire to well-grounded opinion rather than real knowledge.

The contrast is fundamental. Both schools answered the skeptic by saying knowledge is possible. But Epicurus's answer was practical and natural: anyone with functioning senses and a mind cleared of false opinion can know. The Stoic answer was, in practice, aristocratic and artificial: only the perfectly rational sage can genuinely know, and that sage is a theoretical construct rather than a living human being.

This difference matters before we have examined a single argument in detail. A philosophy of knowledge that reserves certainty for an ideal that almost no one achieves has already failed the ordinary person it claims to serve.

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## The Epicurean Position: Sensation Always Reports Truly

The foundation of Epicurean epistemology is stated with characteristic directness by Diogenes Laertius, drawing on Epicurus's lost work *The Canon*:

> In *The Canon* Epicurus states that the sensations, the preconceptions (prolēpseis), and the feelings (pathē) are the criteria of truth. (*Diogenes Laertius*, X.31)[2]

The three criteria form a structured account of how knowledge is possible. Sensation — the direct physical contact between sense organ and external object — provides the foundational data. Preconceptions — the generalized concepts formed through repeated sensory experience — allow us to organize sensory data into intelligible categories. Feelings of pleasure and pain — the natural responses

of any living creature to its environment — provide the evaluative dimension of experience.

Of the three, sensation is both foundational and the most philosophically contentious. Epicurus's claim about sensation is stark and radical: *all sensations are true*. This needs immediate qualification against the obvious objection — what about the oar that appears bent in water, or the square tower that appears round from a distance? — but the qualification is itself philosophically important.

What Epicurus means by "all sensations are true" is that sensation, as such, never falsifies what it reports.[3] Sensation is a direct physical process: atomic films (*eidōla*) shed from the surfaces of objects make contact with the sense organs and produce a modification in the soul. This physical contact, as a physical event, is what it is. It cannot be "wrong" in the way a judgment can be wrong, any more than a thermometer can be "wrong" about the temperature of the liquid it is measuring — it simply registers what it registers.

This is stated with precision in one of the Epicurean fragments preserved in what scholars call the "Usener collection" (fragment 244), drawing on Sextus Empiricus:

> Sensation, being perceptive of the objects presented to it and neither subtracting nor adding nor transposing — being devoid of reason — constantly reports truly and grasps the existent object as it really is by nature. And whereas all the sensibles are true, the opinables differ: some of them are true, others false.

The key phrase is "neither subtracting nor adding nor transposing."[4] Sensation does not interpret, select, or rearrange what it receives. It is, in DeWitt's phrase, "irrational" — not in a pejorative sense but in the precise sense that it operates entirely below the level of rational judgment. And precisely because it does not judge, it cannot misjudge. Only the mind, when it adds its own opinion to the report of sensation, introduces the possibility of error.

Diogenes Laertius records the same principle from the *Letter to Herodotus*:

> All sensation is irrational and does not admit of memory; for it is not set in motion by itself, nor, when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it. (*Diogenes Laertius*, X.31)[5]

This is the Epicurean account of why sensation is always reliable: it is a purely mechanical response to physical contact, incapable of the kind of active interpretation that would introduce error. The senses are reliable precisely because they are passive reporters rather than active interpreters.

The apparent bent oar is then easily explained: the sensation of bentness is not false — the light genuinely is refracted by the water in the way that produces that sensory modification. What would be false is the *judgment* "the oar is actually bent" — a judgment that goes beyond what sensation reports and adds an opinion about the oar's intrinsic properties. The sensation reports accurately; the error, if any, lies in the opinion we form about what the sensation means.

This point is made explicitly in *Principal Doctrine* 24:

> If you reject absolutely any single sensation without stopping to distinguish between opinion about things awaiting confirmation and that which is already confirmed to be present, whether in sensation or in feelings or in any application of intellect to the presentations, you will confuse the rest of your sensations by your groundless opinion and so you will reject every standard of truth.

The practical implication is direct and important: you cannot selectively discount some sensations as "false" without destroying your ability to trust any sensation at all. The sensory foundation is either reliable across the board or not reliable at all. Epicurus chose to affirm its universal reliability — and to locate the source of error exclusively in the judgments the mind adds to sensory reports.

### Norman DeWitt on the Canon

Norman DeWitt, in *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1954), provides what remains the most systematic English-language analysis of Epicurean canonics from a perspective sympathetic to Epicurus's actual intentions. DeWitt emphasizes that the Canon represents a genuinely new philosophical approach — not merely a variant of existing epistemological frameworks but a distinct and carefully structured alternative.

DeWitt observes that Epicurus's division between sensation and opinion is not a casual distinction but the load-bearing beam of the entire epistemological structure:

> The Sensations in the meaning of the Canon denote the five senses, vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, and nothing else. They qualify as criteria because they are direct physical contacts between the living being and the external physical reality. They also qualify as criteria because they are irrational, are incapable of memory, and pronounce no judgments. (*Epicurus and His Philosophy*, p. 134)[6]

DeWitt stresses that calling sensation "irrational" is a positive characterization, not a dismissal. The irrationality of sensation is precisely what makes it reliable: it cannot construct false narratives, cannot introduce prior assumptions, cannot be swayed by expectations or desires. It simply reports.

This matters enormously for the contrast with Stoicism. As we shall see, the Stoics built their epistemology on a radically different picture of what sensation is — one in which the rational element of the mind is involved from the beginning in the reception of impressions, with major consequences for how truth and error are distributed.

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## The Stoic Position: The Kataleptic Impression — and Its Fatal Flaw

The Stoic epistemology begins from a very different picture of what happens when the mind encounters the world — and that different picture contains, from the Epicurean perspective, a fundamental error that undermines the entire edifice built upon it.

For the Stoics, the soul is itself a form of intelligent, rational fire — a breath of a particular tension (*pneuma*) — and its engagement with the external world through the senses is therefore from the beginning an engagement of a rational faculty with external reality. Sense-impressions (*phantasiai*) are not merely physical contacts but modifications of the rational soul — events that have propositional content and can therefore be true or false.

This is the first and most fundamental error in the Stoic account: by making sensation the product of a rational faculty rather than a non-rational physical contact, the Stoics have introduced into the very foundation of knowledge a faculty

that is capable of distortion, prejudice, and prior-belief contamination. When the Epicurean senses report, they report what they physically receive — nothing more, nothing less. When the Stoic rational soul encounters an impression, it is already interpreting, already bringing to bear all the potentially distorting influences of prior beliefs, desires, and expectations. The Stoics then have to work backward from this already-compromised starting point to try to identify a special subset of impressions that can be trusted — the kataleptic impression (*phantasia katalēptikē*).

Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, defined the kataleptic impression as the Stoic criterion of truth. His three-part definition, as reported by Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Logicians*, M VII.248) and by Cicero in the *Academica*, runs as follows:[7]

A kataleptic impression is one that:

1. Arises from an actually existing object (*apo hyparchontos*)
2. Is impressed and stamped exactly in accordance with that object
3. Is of a character that could not have arisen from a non-existing object

The first two conditions are descriptions of accurate perception that any sensible philosophy would accept. The third condition is where the Stoic account collapses under its own weight. It amounts to the claim that a kataleptic impression carries its own certification of accuracy within itself — that there is something in the character of a genuine kataleptic impression (its clarity, its forcefulness, its comprehensive detail) that is sufficient to distinguish it from any false impression, and that an impression of this quality could not have been produced by anything other than the actual object it represents.

This third clause is precisely what the Academic Skeptics — who were, remember, arguing *against* the Stoics — exposed as unsatisfiable. For any impression, however vivid and clear, an indistinguishable false impression is always possible. Dreams, hallucinations, and the testimony of the deranged all produce impressions that feel exactly as clear and compelling as genuine perceptions. If there were truly something in the *character* of a genuine impression that made it recognizably different from a false one, the problem of perceptual error could never arise. But it clearly does arise, constantly. The Stoics knew this, which is why the

theory went through multiple revisions. Chrysippus qualified Zeno's definition; "later Stoics" revised it further. Each revision was an acknowledgment that the original criterion had been shown insufficient. This is not a sign of a healthy philosophical tradition refining itself; it is a sign of a criterion that fails to do the work it was designed to do.

Cicero, in the *Academica*, preserves Zeno's famous physical illustration of the stages of knowledge (*Academica* II.145):[8]

> Zeno would spread out the fingers of one hand and display its open palm, saying "An impression is like this." Next he clenched his fingers a little and said, "Assent is like this."[9] Then, pressing his fingers quite together he made a fist, and said that this was comprehension (*katalepsis*) — and from this illustration he gave that mental state the name of *katalepsis*, which it had not had before. But then he used to apply his left hand to his right fist and squeeze it firmly, and say that knowledge was of this character, and that this was what none but a wise person possessed.

The stages are: impression (*phantasia*) — assent (*sunkatathesis*) — cognitive grasp (*katalēpsis*) — knowledge (*epistēmē*). The gesture is vivid and memorable. But notice what it reveals: knowledge, for Zeno, is "what none but a wise person possessed." The entire system points upward toward a standard that ordinary people cannot reach — and from an Epicurean perspective, this reveals the fundamental misdirection of the whole approach. Epicurus did not build a criterion of truth that was available only to the wise; he identified the criteria that nature has provided to every living creature. The question is not how the wise person grasps truth but how any person, equipped only with what nature gave them, can know the world they live in.

The practical point is this: the Stoics acknowledged that impressions can be either true or false. From this acknowledgment the entire apparatus of the kataleptic impression follows. If not all impressions are reliable, you need a criterion for distinguishing the reliable ones from the unreliable ones. But this creates an infinite regress problem that the Stoics never solved: how do you identify a kataleptic impression *without* using the very faculty whose reliability is in question? The answer the Stoics gave — that the kataleptic impression carries its own self-certifying character — is exactly the answer the Academic Skeptics demolished.

### The Stoic Hierarchy: An Epistemology That Fails Ordinary People

The Stoic picture involves a damaging hierarchy of epistemic states. At the bottom is any impression, reliable or not (*phantasia*). In the middle is the cognitive grasp of a certified impression (*katalēpsis*). At the top is the systematic, unshakeable knowledge of the sage (*epistēmē*). Only the sage possesses genuine knowledge, because only the sage can maintain a perfectly consistent system of kataleptic impressions without the interference of false opinion.

The ordinary non-sage is caught in a precarious middle position: capable of receiving kataleptic impressions in principle, but also susceptible to false impressions and — crucially — without any reliable way to distinguish the two. The ordinary person tends to assent too quickly to impressions that feel kataleptic but are not, and this impulsive over-assent (*propeteia*, or precipitancy) is, for the Stoics, the root of both intellectual error and moral failure. The Stoic solution is to train the rational faculty through dialectic until it can reliably identify kataleptic impressions. But since the training itself requires using the faculty that is being trained, and since the standard of completion is the sage who barely exists, the program is circular and practically unreachable.

From the Epicurean perspective, this is the Stoic epistemology's deepest failure: it takes what should be a natural and universal capacity — the ability to know the world — and transforms it into the exclusive property of a philosophical ideal. The Epicurean criteria of truth require no special training to access. You are in contact with them constantly, through every sensation you experience and every natural feeling you have. What requires effort is not acquiring the criteria but protecting them from corruption by false opinions that philosophy can identify and remove. The Stoics have it exactly backward: they locate the problem in the faculties themselves and try to build a better apparatus. Epicurus locates the problem in the false beliefs layered over perfectly reliable faculties, and tries to clear them away.

Chrysippus reportedly said the sage was harder to find than the phoenix. The Epicurean response is: that is not a description of how difficult genuine wisdom is — it is a description of how badly the Stoics have misunderstood what wisdom requires.

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## The Location of Error: The Epicurean Advantage

The sharpest and most practically significant difference between the two epistemologies concerns where error is located — and the Epicurean answer is both simpler and more defensible than the Stoic one.

For Epicurus, sensation never errs. Error arises exclusively in the opinions and judgments the mind adds to sensory reports. The error lies in the leap from "the tower looks round" (a true sensory report) to "the tower is round" (a judgment that goes beyond what the senses report to a conclusion about the tower's intrinsic properties, which can only be confirmed or refuted by approaching and examining it more closely). This is a clean, workable account of error: the senses are reliable; the reasoning mind is fallible; error occurs when the reasoning mind oversteps what the senses have established.

For the Stoics, error occurs through the wrong exercise of rational assent — assenting to a false or non-kataleptic impression as if it were kataleptic. This sounds like a similar account, but it contains a hidden problem. The Stoic account requires that the rational faculty be able, in principle, to identify which impressions are kataleptic — to distinguish the ones that genuinely cannot have come from a non-existing object from those that merely feel that way. But as the Academic Skeptics argued compellingly, no impression feels different from inside whether it is kataleptic or not. The vivid dream feels exactly as clear and compelling as the waking perception. If the rational soul cannot, in practice, reliably distinguish kataleptic from non-kataleptic impressions — and the entire history of human perceptual error suggests it cannot — then the Stoic criterion fails at exactly the moment it is most needed.

Whitney Schwab, in a careful analysis of both accounts, identifies the fundamental structural difference:

> Despite their agreement on the representational role of sense-impressions, the Epicureans and Stoics have quite different conceptions of both their nature and formation. In particular, the Epicureans maintain that sense-impressions are non-rational states while the Stoics conceive of them as rational states.

> This disagreement is explicit and well-attested in our sources. For instance, Epicurus straightforwardly says that all perception is non-rational (*alogon*).

This is the core of the Epicurean advantage. By making sensations non-rational — mechanical physical contacts rather than rational evaluations — Epicurus places them below the level at which distortion is possible. You cannot corrupt a report that simply registers what it physically receives. You can corrupt only the judgment you make about what that report means. The Stoics, by making impressions rational from the beginning, make them susceptible to all the distorting influences that can affect rational cognition — prior beliefs, prejudices, expectations, desires — and then have to introduce an elaborate apparatus to try to identify the uncorrupted ones, an apparatus that turns out to be practically inoperable.

The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy captures the Epicurean principle precisely:

> The photographic reliability of the senses is what makes them not only true but a criterion of truth.

"Photographic reliability" is exactly right: a photograph does not judge; it registers. The Epicurean sense is a registering mechanism, not an evaluating one. And precisely because it registers rather than evaluates, it cannot register wrongly. The Stoic sense, by contrast, is already an evaluating mechanism — and evaluating mechanisms can evaluate incorrectly. The Stoics have built their epistemology on a foundation that is inherently susceptible to the very errors they are trying to eliminate.

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## Epicurus Rejects Dialectic: Logic Is Not a Path to Truth

One of the most important and least understood features of Epicurean epistemology is its systematic rejection of dialectic — the formal logical method of argument-by-syllogism that was central to both the Platonic and, later, the Stoic philosophical programs.

Diogenes Laertius states this directly:

> Logic they reject as misleading. For they say it is sufficient for physicists to be guided by what things say of themselves. (*Diogenes Laertius*, X.31)[10]

The phrase "what things say of themselves" is the key.[11] For Epicurus, the evidence that matters is the direct testimony of the natural criteria — sensation, preconception, feeling. When fire is hot and snow is white and honey is sweet, these are facts established directly by the natural criteria of truth. No syllogism is needed to establish them, and no syllogism could add to the certainty they already possess.

Cicero, in *De Finibus* Book I, presents the Epicurean position on this through the character of Torquatus, who expounds the Epicurean view sympathetically:

> These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident. (*De Finibus* I.22)

The distinction Torquatus draws is illuminating. Syllogistic proof is appropriate for "abstruse and recondite truths" — truths that are not directly accessible to the natural criteria and require chains of inference to establish.[12] But such proof is both unnecessary and potentially misleading for facts that are directly attested by the criteria. Drawing attention to the fact that fire is hot is not a matter of proving it from premises; it is a matter of directing the appropriate faculty toward the evidence.

DeWitt analyzes the deeper reason for Epicurus's rejection of dialectic in *Epicurus and His Philosophy*. He notes that Epicurus identified four major Platonic ideas against which he set his philosophy, and the first was:

> Dramatization of logic, which is called dialectic, best exemplified by the Platonic dialogues. Epicurus judged Platonic dialogues as unnecessarily complex; according to Epicurus, a student needs to study clearly stated principles, not wade through dramatic logic.

But the objection goes beyond style. Dialectic, for Epicurus, was actively dangerous because it created the illusion that verbal cleverness could substitute for genuine evidence. A skilled dialectician can construct a compelling-sounding argument for almost any conclusion — including the conclusion that pleasure is not good, that death is to be feared, that the gods punish human beings for their impiety. If the formal validity of an argument were sufficient to establish truth, we would be at the mercy of whoever was most skilled at constructing arguments. The only protection against this is the insistence that all genuine knowledge must ultimately be anchored in the direct testimony of the natural criteria.

There is also a deeper connection between Epicurus's rejection of dialectic and his rejection of determinism. Formal logic, and especially the syllogism, implies a kind of necessity: if the premises are true and the form is valid, the conclusion necessarily follows. Epicurus was acutely suspicious of claims of necessity in human affairs — his physics, through the atomic swerve, shows that the world is not ruled by necessity, against the determinism of Democritus. A philosophy that made formal logical necessity the arbiter of truth would be, in this sense, philosophically aligned with the very determinism Epicurus was most concerned to refute.

## The Stoic Embrace of Dialectic: The Wrong Tool for the Wrong Diagnosis

The contrast with the Stoics could hardly be sharper. Chrysippus and the Stoic school made dialectic — the art of rigorous argument — a central component of philosophical education and one of the three major divisions of philosophy. For the Stoics, dialectic was not a luxury but a fundamental discipline essential to the life of the sage.

Diogenes Laertius reports from the Stoic tradition:

> They say that dialectic is necessary and is itself a virtue, embracing several specific virtues under it. For freedom from precipitancy is knowledge of when we ought and when we ought not to give assent; for this prevents us from being taken in by specious arguments. (*Diogenes Laertius*, VII.46-47)

The stated purpose — preventing us from being taken in by specious arguments — sounds reasonable. But notice what the Stoics have done: they have identified

the problem as the untrained rational faculty, and the solution as training it more thoroughly through dialectic. This is the natural consequence of getting the foundational diagnosis wrong. If you believe that impressions are rational states that can be distorted, the only remedy seems to be more rationality — more training, more dialectic, more refinement of the faculty of assent. The ordinary person who has not completed this training remains permanently vulnerable.

The Epicurean diagnosis is different and more practically useful: the problem is not undertrained rationality but accumulated false opinion layered over perfectly reliable natural faculties. Clear away the false opinions and the criteria — which were never defective in themselves — do their job reliably. You do not need to train yourself to be the Stoic sage; you need to clear the philosophical debris that has piled up on top of the natural faculties you already possess. Philosophy as therapy rather than philosophy as logical training.

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## Cicero as Witness: The *Academica* and *De Finibus*

Marcus Tullius Cicero provides the most extensive surviving ancient evidence for both the Stoic and Epicurean epistemological positions, and his testimony is valuable precisely because he was neither an Epicurean nor a straightforward Stoic — he wrote as an Academic, and Academic Skepticism was the third position in the debate, attacking both dogmatist schools.

### The *Academica* on the Kataleptic Impression

The *Academica* — particularly the substantial surviving portion of Book II, known as the *Lucullus* — is the single most important ancient source for the Stoic theory of the kataleptic impression and for the Academic attacks upon it. Cicero presents the Stoic position, primarily through the character of Lucullus, with evident care and philosophical seriousness, even as the ultimate purpose of the work is to demonstrate that the kataleptic impression cannot bear the epistemological weight the Stoics assign to it.

The central Stoic claim is stated by Cicero as follows:

> Zeno's definition [of the cognitive impression] was this: that impression can be apprehended which is imprinted and impressed from a real thing in accordance with that real thing, of such a kind as could not be produced from something unreal. (*Academica* II.77)[13]

The Academic attack, developed at length by Cicero through the character of Arcesilas and Carneades, focuses precisely on the third clause. The Academics argued that for any genuine kataleptic impression, an indistinguishable false impression could in principle be produced — and that therefore no impression can satisfy the third clause. No impression can be "such as could not be produced by what is not real," because our experience of dreaming, of hallucination, and of perceptual illusion shows that the mind can generate impressions that feel exactly as vivid and clear as genuine perceptions of real objects.[14]

Cicero's Academic position does not correspond to the Epicurean position — the Epicureans were among the Academics' targets as well. But Cicero's exposition of both positions provides the clearest ancient account of what distinguished them.

## The *De Finibus* on Epicurean Epistemology

In *De Finibus* Book I, Cicero presents the Epicurean view through Torquatus with admirable clarity, though he will attack it comprehensively in Book II. Torquatus explains the Epicurean criterion:

> It is only by firmly grasping a well-established scientific system, observing the standard or Canon that has fallen as it were from heaven, so that all men may know it — only by making that Canon the test of all our judgments, that we can hope always to stand fast in our belief, unshaken by the eloquence of any man. (*De Finibus* I.19.63, Cicero trans. Rackham)

The phrase "Canon that has fallen as it were from heaven" is Cicero's way of describing the Epicurean claim that the criteria of truth are natural faculties — not constructed by human reasoning but given to every human being by nature itself, as direct and universal as the faculty of sight.[15] They are not the product of philosophical training or logical education; they are the birthright of every person.

This passage also implicitly targets dialectic: the Canon is the protection against being "unshaken by the eloquence of any man" — including the eloquent dialectician who can make an argument for anything.[16] The Stoic who trains in dialectic to resist false arguments is, from the Epicurean perspective, fighting fire with fire. The Epicurean who relies on the Canon is grounded in something that clever argument cannot dislodge.

Cicero's *De Finibus* also contains a pointed observation about the practical difference between Epicurean and Stoic epistemology. In presenting Epicurus's view, Torquatus notes:

> Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance? (*De Finibus* I.19.71)

The point is that sensation grounds not only theoretical knowledge but practical guidance — the pathē (feelings of pleasure and pain) are themselves criteria of the practical truth about what to pursue and what to avoid. The Stoic epistemology, which makes the rational soul the arbiter of truth, tends to disconnect knowledge from the natural criteria in a way that leaves the practical guidance of life unanchored. The Epicurean epistemology, which makes sensation the foundation, keeps theory and practice rooted in the same natural faculty.

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## Sextus Empiricus: The Outside Witness

Sextus Empiricus (fl. c. AD 200) occupies a peculiar position in the ancient epistemological debate. As a Pyrrhonian Skeptic, he is philosophically opposed to both the Epicurean and Stoic positions — both claim to have achieved knowledge, and the Pyrrhonist maintains that neither has done so. But Sextus preserves detailed accounts of both positions in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Pyrrhōneioi Hypotypōseis*, abbreviated PH) and *Against the Professors* (*Adversus Mathematicos*, abbreviated M), and his testimony is indispensable even where his philosophical aim is to refute rather than explicate.

### Sextus on the Epicurean Criteria

In *Against the Logicians* (M VII) Sextus presents the Epicurean criteria of truth in detail. His account of the Epicurean position on sensation is among the clearest summaries in the ancient record:

> Epicurus said that all perceptible things exist such as they appear and strike us in perception, since perception never lies — though we do get things wrong in opining. (*Against the Logicians*, M VIII.185)[17]

And again, from the fragments:

> Sensation, being perceptive of the objects presented to it and neither subtracting nor adding nor transposing — being devoid of reason — constantly reports truly and grasps the existent object as it really is by nature. And whereas all the sensibles are true, the opinables differ: some of them are true, others false. (Fragment U244, from Sextus)[18]

These formulations are particularly valuable because they come from a hostile source. Sextus is not trying to make the Epicurean position look good; he is presenting it accurately in order to mount arguments against it. The clarity of his presentation therefore reflects genuine philosophical precision in the Epicurean original rather than advocacy.

Sextus also provides the important classification of ancient philosophers with respect to their stance on sensory appearances:

> Some of the natural philosophers, like Democritus, have abolished all phenomena; and others, like Epicurus and Protagoras, have established all; while still others, like the Stoics and Peripatetics, have abolished some and established others. (*Against the Logicians*, M VII.369)[19]

This three-way classification is philosophically illuminating. Democritus — whose atomic theory Epicurus inherited and transformed — denied the reliability of all sensory appearances, regarding them as subjective responses that reveal nothing about the true atomic reality underlying them. The Stoics and Peripatetics made discriminations: some appearances are reliable (the kataleptic ones), others not. Epicurus, alone among the major schools, affirmed all sensory appearances as reliable — making him the most thoroughgoing defender of the veracity of sense experience in the ancient world.

This is significant partly because it clarifies the distinction between Epicurus and Protagoras. Sextus classes them together as both "establishing all phenomena," but the grounds are entirely different. Protagoras established all phenomena by making truth relative to the individual perceiver: what appears true to you is true for you. Epicurus established all phenomena by making truth absolute and universal: what the senses report is the same truth for everyone, because the senses are mechanical reporters of a real world that is the same for all. The surface similarity between their positions dissolves on examination.

### Sextus on the Stoic Kataleptic Impression

Sextus's treatment of the Stoic kataleptic impression in *Against the Logicians* (M VII.248-260) is the fullest surviving ancient account of Zeno's definition and is the standard scholarly reference for its analysis.[20] He presents the three-clause definition cited above and then deploys the standard Academic argument against it: that the third clause — "of a character that could not come from something unreal" — is impossible to satisfy, because for any perceptual experience, a qualitatively identical false experience (from a dream, a hallucination, or a very close resemblance) is always possible.

Sextus then reports a significant development in the Stoic account by later Stoics, which he locates at M VII.253-257:

> The later Stoics pointed out that in all but the most special circumstances we simply have no choice whether to assent to a kataleptic impression. Once you have such an impression, you do believe it, and that is that. What is in our own hands is not whether, once we are in a position where the truth is unmistakable, we accept it, but whether we take the trouble to get ourselves into such a position in the first place — moving closer, turning on the light, and so on.

This modification by the "later Stoics" — probably Antipater of Tarsus and his contemporaries, working partly in response to Carneades's attack — is philosophically interesting because it shifts emphasis from the character of the impression itself to the conditions under which it was formed. A kataleptic impression, on this revised view, is one formed under optimal conditions: the right distance, the right light, the right state of the sense organs and the mind. This is a

more externalist and less internalist account than the original Zenonian formulation.

Sextus's own attitude toward both accounts is predictably negative — he argues that neither successfully establishes a criterion that can distinguish genuine from false impressions in a way that would satisfy the skeptic. But his exposition is more reliable as history than his arguments are as philosophy.

### Sextus on the Epicurean Rejection of Formal Logic

Sextus also preserves testimony about the Epicurean attitude toward formal logic and sign-inference that is relevant to the dialectic question. In his account of the Epicurean theory of signs and inference (*semeia*) in *Against the Logicians*, he distinguishes between the kind of inference from observable evidence to non-observable causes that Epicureans used extensively (inference from smoke to fire, from the motion of the surface to the underlying currents) and the formal syllogistic demonstration that Epicurus rejected.

David Sedley, in his 1992 paper "Sextus Empiricus and the Atomist Criteria of Truth" (*Elenchos* 13, 1992, pp. 21-56), argues that Sextus's account of Epicurean inference is more sophisticated than is sometimes recognized.[21] Sedley shows that Epicurus did not reject *all* reasoning from evidence — that would make natural philosophy impossible. What he rejected was the specifically *dialectical* form of argument: the syllogism, the formal demonstration from premises that could be accepted independently of any sensory evidence. Epicurean inference is always inference *from* sensory evidence; it does not transcend or override sensory evidence.

This is the precise point at which the Epicurean and Stoic epistemologies diverge in their practical philosophical methods. The Stoics use dialectical argument to establish their physical and ethical conclusions, with the trained philosopher constructing chains of inference that lead from accepted premises to philosophically important conclusions. The Epicureans point to the evidence and draw the simplest inference that the evidence supports, rejecting any argument whose conclusion contradicts the direct testimony of the criteria.

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## The Deeper Difference: What Kind of Mind?

Underlying the specific disagreements about sensation, the cognitive grasp (*katalepsis*), and dialectic is a deeper disagreement about the nature of the human mind and its relationship to the world.

For the Stoics, the human mind — the *hēgemonikon* (the ruling or governing part of the soul, located by the Stoics in the heart) — is a rational, propositional faculty. It receives impressions that have propositional content, evaluates them by applying its rational capacities, and assents or withholds assent. The Stoic mind is a judge: it sits above the stream of incoming impressions and passes verdicts on them. Its virtue lies in judging well; its failure lies in judging hastily or incorrectly.

For Epicurus, the mind is something more like a double system. The sensory faculties are non-rational, mechanical, and perfectly reliable. The reasoning faculty — the part of the soul that forms opinions and makes judgments — is rational but fallible. The task of philosophy is to train the reasoning faculty to form correct opinions by staying close to what the sensory faculties actually report and not adding anything beyond what they establish.

This difference has an important implication for the role of reason in each epistemology. For the Stoics, reason is the criterion of truth at the highest level: the sage's rational system of kataleptic impressions, held firmly and consistently, constitutes genuine knowledge. Reason does not merely interpret sensory data — it is the active faculty that grasps truth directly. For Epicurus, reason is the servant of sensation: its job is to interpret sensory data correctly, not to transcend it. "When once we quit the basis of sensation," as Jefferson would later paraphrase the Epicurean position, "all is in the wind."[22]

This has a further consequence for the philosophical project as a whole. The Stoics believed that the sage — the perfectly rational person who has trained their rational faculty to perfection — could achieve genuine, unshakeable knowledge of reality. This is an epistemology of aspiration toward an ideal rational state. Epicurus believed that genuine knowledge was in principle available to anyone whose natural faculties were functioning and whose false opinions had

been cleared away by correct philosophical understanding. This is an epistemology of recovery and clarification — not the achievement of a superhuman rational ideal, but the restoration of the natural epistemic condition that false beliefs have obscured.

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## The Verdict: Why the Epicurean Account Is Superior

The contrast between Epicurean and Stoic epistemology can now be summarized as a clear verdict rather than a neutral comparison. At every point the Epicurean account is more naturalistic, more accessible, and more practically adequate than the Stoic one.

**On the nature of sensation:** Epicurus holds that all sensations are true as sensations — they are non-rational mechanical registrations of physical reality that cannot err. The Stoics hold that impressions are modifications of the rational soul with propositional content that can be true or false — which immediately requires an apparatus to sort the reliable from the unreliable, and that apparatus turns out to be practically inoperable.

**On the location of error:** For Epicurus, error arises exclusively in the opinions the reasoning mind adds to correct sensory reports — a clean, direct diagnosis with a clear remedy. For the Stoics, error arises from wrong rational assent to non-kataleptic impressions — a diagnosis that requires identifying which impressions are kataleptic, which no ordinary person can reliably do, which is why the Stoics reserved genuine knowledge for the sage.

**On the criterion of truth:** For Epicurus, the criterion is the set of natural faculties provided by nature to every living creature — sensation, preconception, and feeling — which are direct, universal, non-technical, and present from birth. For the Stoics, the criterion is the kataleptic impression, a specific class identifiable only by trained rational discrimination — which, as the Academic Skeptics demonstrated at length, no one can reliably perform.

**On the role of dialectic:** Epicurus rejects dialectic as misleading — formal logical argument, however valid, cannot substitute for the direct testimony of the natural criteria, and its misuse in the hands of a skilled sophist can construct a com-

pelling argument for any conclusion, including the denial of pleasure as the natural guide of life. The Stoics embrace dialectic as essential — and thereby commit themselves to an endless training program with an ideal endpoint that is practically unreachable.

**On who can know:** Epicurean knowledge is open to anyone of normal intelligence and is natural: anyone with functioning senses and a mind cleared of false opinion can know. Stoic knowledge culminates in a sage so rare he practically does not exist.

The Epicurean position is, in a deep sense, more consistently naturalist than the Stoic one. It grounds epistemology entirely in the natural faculties provided to all living creatures, makes no appeal to a specially trained rational faculty that transcends ordinary experience, and requires no special philosophical apparatus to access. You were born with the criteria of truth. Philosophy's job is to prevent you from corrupting them — not to build you a new and better apparatus for knowing, and certainly not to tell you that genuine knowledge is reserved for the philosopher who has completed a training program that no one has ever actually finished.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# The 'Academic Questions' Behind Evaluation Of Pleasure and Happiness

"Academic Questions" sounds like exactly what a modern reader expects from ancient philosophy: a dry, technical argument about definitions, conducted by men with nothing better to do, over a question no one outside a classics department has any reason to care about. That impression is wrong. The argument Cicero stages between Lucullus and himself – whether the senses can ever deliver real knowledge, or whether we are stuck with mere probability – is not a side issue in ancient philosophy. It is the argument underneath the argument about happiness. Settle it one way, and ordinary felt pleasure is already the good, available to any infant and any adult who has not been talked out of trusting his own feelings. Settle it the other way, and pleasure becomes suspect, secondary, something to be corrected or transcended by people educated enough to access a higher, separate reality that most human beings never reach. That second answer is Plato's, and he did not arrive at it by arguing about pleasure directly. He arrived at it by arguing, first, about what can be known at all – exactly the question *Academic Questions* spends two long books fighting over three centuries later.

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## The Argument Plato Makes Before He Ever Mentions Pleasure

Long before Plato says a word about whether pleasure is good, he has already made a decision that settles the question in advance. Varro's account of the Old Academy's epistemology, recorded in *Academic Questions* Book One, states the doctrine plainly: knowledge, properly speaking, belongs only to the intellect grasping the fixed and unchanging "Forms" behind the flux of ordinary experi-

ence. The senses themselves – "dull and slow" – can never rise above mere opinion. Being (*ousia*), the realm of what is always the same, is knowable. Becoming (*genesis*), the realm of what is constantly changing – which includes the entire physical world, and every bodily sensation in it – is not.

This is not yet an argument about ethics. It is an argument about what counts as real knowledge at all. But it has an ethical implication built into it from the start: whatever belongs to Becoming cannot be the highest good, because the highest good, on this view, has to be something stable enough to be truly known. Pleasure, felt in a body that is constantly changing, is disqualified from being counted as the highest good before the ethical argument even opens its case.

## Philebus: Pleasure Convicted of Being a Process, Not a Thing

Plato's *Philebus* runs this disqualification through explicitly, using pleasure as the test case. Kelly Arenson, in *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus* (2019), states the stakes of the dialogue's opening argument this way:

> "If pleasure is a process toward health rather than an end, then it belongs to the realm of becoming rather than that of being, and so it cannot, on Plato's view, qualify as good in itself. Clearly, much is at stake for the hedonist in this dispute: Plato aims to diminish the goodness of pleasure by employing a certain description of pleasure's nature."[1]
>
> – Arenson, *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus*, p. 30, previewing what she calls the "process argument" Socrates makes at Plato, *Philebus* 53c4-55c3

The mechanism is simple once it is named. Pleasure, on the *Philebus*'s restoration model, is the process of filling a depleted organism back up to its natural balance – the way eating restores the body's balance after hunger has depleted it. A process, by definition, is always still becoming something else; it is never simply, stably, what it is. Health, the state the process aims at, might qualify as a stable "being." The process of getting there cannot. This is the origin of the argument that pleasure supposedly has no natural limit, that it can never be "complete" the way Plato alleges genuine goods are complete. Epicurus's answer – that the limit of pleasure is reached the moment all pain is removed, which is a real ceiling and not a receding horizon – is aimed exactly at this Platonic argu-

ment. Epicurus's answer works because it refuses Plato's premise. Pleasure is not disqualified from being a stable, complete good just because it is felt in a changing body. Feeling itself, on the Epicurean canon, is already a sufficient and final court of appeal. Nothing has to first pass through Plato's separate, higher category of unchanging Being before it can be counted as real.

## Republic Book Nine: The Same Argument Applied To Suggest A Hierarchy of Lives

If the *Philebus* disqualifies pleasure at the level of metaphysics, *Republic* Book Nine cashes in on that disqualification by deciding that we can rank actual human lives in terms of their pleasure. Socrates first tries to discredit what we think of as ordinary pleasure directly by calling most of what people call pleasure mere "shadow-paintings" of the real thing. As Arenson writes, quoting Plato directly:

> "There is nothing sound in these appearances as far as the truth about pleasure is concerned, only some kind of magic."[2]
>
> – Arenson, *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus*, p. 13, quoting Plato, *Republic* 584a9-10

These "bastard pleasures," Socrates says, are simply relief from a prior pain masquerading as something positive – and he pictures three zones on a vertical line, pain at the bottom, a neutral resting state in the middle, and only pure, unmixed pleasure at the very top, out of reach of anyone who has never actually arrived there.

Having tried and – in Arenson's opinion – largely failed to make that argument hold together on its own terms, Socrates tries the Being/Becoming approach. Arenson translates Plato as follows:

> "And which kinds do you think partake more of pure being? Filling up with bread, drink, delicacies, and food in general? Or the kind of filling up that is with true belief, knowledge, understanding, and, in sum, with every virtue? Judge it this way: that which clings closely to what is always the same, immortal, and true, and is itself of that kind and comes to be in something of that kind – do you think it is more than that which clings closely to what is mortal and never the same, is itself of that kind, and comes to be in something of that kind?"[3]

> – Arenson's translation, *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus*, p. 15, of Plato, *Republic* 585b9-c5

In other words, a pleasure is only as real as what fills it, and only the intellect's own objects – truth, knowledge, virtue, the unchanging Forms – count as fully real. Bodily pleasure inherits the second-rate metaphysical status of food and drink, which belong to the realm of the "mortal and never the same." The philosopher's pleasure outranks the profit-lover's and the honor-lover's not because it feels better in any direct sense a person could simply notice, but because the philosopher alone has true access to the standard – Being – against which all pleasure is supposedly to be graded.

Socrates then tries to put a number on the result, arriving at his famous claim that the philosopher-king lives **729 times** more pleasantly than the tyrant (Plato, *Republic* 587e). Arenson does not hold back her criticism:

> "Socrates' comparison of the quantitative pleasure of the kingly and tyrannical lives is so over the top as to be utterly ridiculous... In Plato's 'calculation' in book 9, there are in fact no 'pleasure units': Socrates arrives at 729 by first counting the tyrant's distance from the king in the ranking of psychic constitutions and then performing some 'squaring and cubing' (587d9-10)."
>
> – Arenson, *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus*, p. 26, discussing Plato, *Republic* 587d-e

Arenson argues that better than this ridiculous calculation was Plato's final argument: that the philosophic life is most pleasant because it alone achieves psychic harmony, the whole soul working without civil war under reason's government. This is closer, on her reading, to an ideal of health than to any single felt sensation. That argument may seem more palatable than "729 times better," but it keeps the same fallacious structure: only the rationally governed soul, in contact with Being – *what truly is* – gets to count as real, complete happiness. Everyone else is left with nothing but shadow-paintings.

## How "Academic Questions" Describes The Same Fight

All of this is directly applicable to Cicero's *Academic Questions*. The entire quarrel between Lucullus and Cicero is over whether the senses can deliver a genuine criterion of truth. From the Epicurean perspective both the *kataleptic impression*

argued for by the Stoics and the bare *probability* argued for by the Academic skeptics are fatally flawed, but the argument revolves around the same issue. Cicero himself, once his own reply is under way, spends chapter after chapter pressing exactly the doubt about the senses that Plato had already used to demote the entire realm of Becoming beneath the realm of Being. Cicero's arguments are all too familiar: the bent oar, the dove's neck, the sun looking no bigger than a foot across, dreams and madness collapsing the difference between true and false perception from the inside.

When Cicero finally reaches his closing survey of rival positions, he puts Plato's answer to the canon-of-truth question on the table beside Epicurus's, the Cyrenaics', and Protagoras's, stating it in language that echoes Varro's opening account of the Forms almost word for word: truth belongs to "thought and intellect," separated from both opinion and the senses.

Plato, the Academic skeptics, and the Stoics start with the same problem – the senses appear to be untrustworthy. The skeptic concludes: settle for probability, and never claim more certainty than the evidence allows. Plato concludes: abandon the senses as a path to real knowledge altogether, and turn instead to an unchanging, separate reality only the trained intellect can reach. The Stoics conclude: men have been so designed by nature that they are able to receive kataleptic impressions so clear that they cannot possibly be false, so that by looking to the design of the universe itself the sage can – at least in principle – reliably determine what is true.

Epicurus's approach is entirely different: refuse to accept the initial suspicion of the senses. The senses are not almost-reliable witnesses straining toward a higher standard they can never quite meet. They **are** the standard. All sensations are true reports of what has actually affected the organism. Error comes into play only afterward, in the opinions the mind adds to what the senses report, never in the senses themselves. Once that is understood and accepted – once we truly trust the senses – there is no need to go looking the way Plato does for some separate and superior category of pleasure belonging to Being rather than Becoming. The entire premise that manufactured that need – that felt experience is too unstable and second-rate to count as knowledge – was false from the outset.

## What This Means for Happiness and Real Life

If Plato is right that only the intellect's contact with unchanging Being counts as real knowledge, then real happiness is, by deduction, available only to the rare person capable of that contact. It is no surprise, on this view, that it is only philosophers like Socrates or Plato themselves, trained for years, who are able to turn the soul away from the body's pleasures and toward the Forms.

Everyone else, unable to attain such a god-like state, is left with nothing but shadow-paintings: they mistake relief from want or pain for the real thing. They are left with a life that Plato tells us we can grade as some fraction – a seven-hundred-and-twenty-ninth part – of the pleasure that a philosopher is supposedly getting to feel. By Plato's own terms, the overwhelming majority of human beings who have ever lived were, by definition, shut out from the highest happiness available to their species, through no fault of their own except that they lacked the rare philosophical training that alone makes it available.[4]

Epicurus refuses this analysis from the word go because he refuses the view of knowledge that generated it. The senses and the feelings **are** a sufficient standard of truth. They are not inferior stand-ins for intellect, not something to be disparaged in the light of some theoretical standard of "Being." The pleasure felt by an infant reaching for its mother, by an uneducated farmer eating bread after a day's work, or by anyone at all who enjoys more pleasure than pain, is not a shadow of anything. It is the real thing, already good in itself, already known directly and with total confidence, exactly as we know that snow is white and honey is sweet – the same way everything is known: through feeling, which does not lie. Cicero spends two books describing for us the argument about whether the senses can be trusted, but what is actually at stake is whether pleasure and happiness can belong to everyone or only to the few.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Epicurus Against The White Flags of Surrender: Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonists

Of all the philosophical enemies Epicurus faced, none were more insidious than the skeptics. The Stoics and Platonists at least claimed to know things — and could therefore be argued with, corrected, and refuted on the basis of what the evidence actually shows. The skeptics were more obstinate opponents. They claimed, in various ways, that knowing things was impossible — and from that position it is very hard to dislodge anyone, because every argument you make against them can be met with the same response: perhaps, but how can you be sure?

Epicurus was sure. The Canon — his account of how knowledge is actually possible, grounded in sensation, in the anticipations nature builds through experience, and in the feelings of pleasure and pain — was not an epistemological opinion that could be set against the skeptics' epistemological opinion and treated as one view among many. It was, Epicurus insisted, the account of how every human being actually does acquire knowledge of the world, including the skeptics themselves, whether they acknowledged it or not. The skeptics were not discovering a genuine problem with human knowledge. They were performing a philosophical confusion and calling it wisdom.

There is a reason this matters urgently for anyone studying Epicurus today — and it goes beyond academic history. One of the most persistent and damaging errors in modern presentations of Epicurean philosophy is the elevation of *ataraxia* — freedom from disturbance — as the central goal of the philosophy. "Epicurus teaches ataraxia," the textbooks say, and the reader nods and moves on. The problem is that the Pyrrhonists — the most radical skeptics in the ancient

world, and among the most determined opponents of everything Epicurus stood for — also claimed to teach ataraxia. They used the exact same word to describe the goal of their philosophy. And their ataraxia, as we will see, was not a description of the pleasurable life fully lived. It was a description of the philosophical equivalent of switching off.

This confusion would be impossible if Epicurus's actual teaching were kept clearly in view. Epicurus does not say the goal of life is ataraxia. He says the goal of life is *pleasure* — that pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life, that nature itself has provided pleasure and pain as the guides by which every living creature navigates toward genuine goods and away from genuine harms, and that the philosophical life aimed at pleasure, guided by reason and wisdom, is the best life available to a human being. Ataraxia — freedom from groundless disturbance — is one component of that pleasurable life, not its definition and not its goal. Sometimes life does require the disturbance of urgent action. The moment you substitute ataraxia for pleasure as the central term, you have opened the door to the Pyrrhonist, who can walk straight through it and claim to be teaching Epicurean philosophy. Keeping pleasure as the goal keeps that door shut. The two philosophies cannot be confused when you take Epicurus at his word.

So there were two distinct and importantly different skeptical traditions that Epicurus and his followers confronted — and understanding what separates them is essential to understanding what is wrong with each.



## The First Stream: Skepticism from the Inside — The Academic Tradition

To understand Academic Skepticism you have to understand how it arose, because its origin is one of the more remarkable transformations in the history of philosophy. Plato founded the Academy in Athens around 387 BC as a school for the pursuit of philosophical and mathematical knowledge. For generations it operated as what ancient philosophers called a "dogmatic" school — meaning not dogmatic in the pejorative modern sense, but in the technical ancient sense: it taught definite doctrines and maintained them. Plato's theory of Forms, the

immortality of the soul, the supremacy of reason over sensation — these were the Academy's commitments, and it defended them.

Then something happened. In the third century BC, the Academy underwent a philosophical revolution under a leader named Arcesilaus. Arcesilaus turned the Academy against its own Platonic heritage — or, more precisely, turned it against the Platonic heritage as the Stoics were attempting to appropriate it. The Stoics, under Zeno and Chrysippus, had developed a theory of knowledge centered on what they called the "kataleptic impression" — a mental impression so clear and distinct that it guaranteed its own accuracy and could serve as the foundation for certain knowledge. Arcesilaus attacked this claim with devastating effect, arguing that no impression could be so clear and distinct as to guarantee its own accuracy, and that therefore suspension of judgment was the only honest response to any question.

His successor Carneades pushed the argument further and in more directions. Carneades was one of the most brilliantly destructive debaters in ancient philosophy. He made it his practice to argue both sides of any question with equal force, demonstrating that for every philosophical position, an equally compelling case could be made for the opposite, and that certainty was therefore nowhere to be found. He is reported to have once delivered a speech in Rome in praise of justice — and then the next day delivered an equally convincing speech against it — for the explicit purpose of demonstrating that certainty on ethical questions is impossible.

The Academic Skeptics called themselves "Academics" because they occupied the Academy, Plato's own school. They directed their arguments primarily against the Stoics, whose theory of knowledge was their main target. But they did not limit their attacks to the Stoics. Epicurean claims to reliable knowledge through sensation were equally in their sights, and the Academic argument against sensation as a reliable guide — the familiar litany of perceptual illusions, the tower that looks round from far away and square up close, the oar that appears bent in water, the honey that tastes sweet to the healthy and bitter to the feverish — was applied to Epicurean epistemology with the same force as to Stoic.

The Academic response to this supposed situation was not total silence. Carneades introduced the concept of the *pithanon* — the "probable" or "persuasive" — as a practical substitute for knowledge. We cannot know with certainty, but we can identify some impressions as more persuasive than others, and act on those. This is the skepticism familiar from Cicero, who was himself deeply influenced by the Academic tradition and presents its arguments at length in his philosophical dialogues. It is arguably a more livable position: suspend judgment about certainty, but act on probability.

Epicurus's response to this entire tradition was that it mistook a philosophical argument for a genuine epistemological discovery. The Academic argument works only if you accept a standard of knowledge so demanding that nothing could meet it — the standard of infallible certainty — and then declare that since nothing meets that standard, nothing is known. But that standard was never the right one. The right standard is what the Canon provides: does this account cohere with what sensation reports? Does it predict accurately what further observation reveals? Has the experience built up through many encounters generated a genuine anticipation — a reliable pre-formed recognition of what things of this kind are like? These tests produce reliable knowledge — not infallible certainty, but reliable enough to direct a life and build a philosophy.

As for the Academic's appeal to perceptual illusions: Epicurus's answer is that the illusions are not in the sensations but in the judgments we form on top of them. The oar in the water looks bent — that is what sensation accurately reports about the visual relationship between this eye, this oar, and this water. The error comes when we judge that the oar is bent in fact, going beyond what sensation reports. The correction is more observation and better judgment, not abandonment of sensation as a guide. The Academic who cites the bent oar as evidence against sensation has misidentified where the error occurs.

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## The Second Stream: Skepticism from the East — Pyrrho and His Heirs

The second skeptical tradition is older than Academic Skepticism in its origins, more radical in its conclusions, and stranger in its genealogy. Its founder was

Pyrrho of Elis, a contemporary of Epicurus — both were born around 360 BC — who came to philosophy through an unusual route.

Pyrrho had been a painter before he became a philosopher. He was drawn into philosophical company through the Democritean tradition, and he subsequently traveled with Alexander the Great's army on its conquest of the East, spending time in Persia and reaching India. There, according to Diogenes Laertius and other ancient sources, he encountered two groups of teachers whose influence on his subsequent philosophy appears to have been substantial: the *gymnosophists* — the "naked wise men," Indian ascetic philosophers who rejected material possessions including clothing as irrelevant to genuine wisdom — and the Persian Magi.

What exactly Pyrrho absorbed from these encounters is disputed by scholars, and there were genuine practical difficulties: multiple layers of translation were required, and the quality of philosophical communication through three interpreters is inherently limited. Nevertheless, the parallels between Pyrrho's subsequent philosophy and certain Indian philosophical traditions — particularly Buddhism and Jainism — are striking enough to have attracted serious scholarly attention. The Buddhist doctrine that attachment to views and beliefs generates suffering, and that liberation comes from releasing all such attachment, maps onto Pyrrho's central claim with remarkable precision. The Indian concept of *anatta* — no-self, the dissolution of the individual into a state beyond personal desire and judgment — echoes in the Pyrrhonist ideal of the sage who has achieved total suspension of judgment and the tranquility that supposedly follows from it.

Pyrrho himself wrote nothing. What we know of his views comes primarily through his student Timon of Phlius, and even Timon's works survive only in fragments quoted by later authors. The tradition Pyrrho established did not immediately flourish — it was the Academic Skeptics, occupying Plato's own institution, who dominated philosophical discussion in the Hellenistic period.

Pyrrhonism was formally revived and systematized centuries later by Aenesidemus, a first-century BC philosopher who had himself been associated with the Academy and became dissatisfied with what he considered the Academic Skeptics' excessive willingness to accept probability as a practical guide. Aen-

esidemus argued that the Academics had been insufficiently radical — that probability was just another form of dogmatism in disguise. He organized the Pyrrhonist arguments into ten systematic "modes" or "tropes," categories of consideration that could generate suspension of judgment on any question whatsoever.

A second generation of systematizers, associated with a figure called Agrippa, reduced these ten modes to five and then to two, stripping the arguments to their most essential logical forms. And then, at the end of the line, came Sextus Empiricus — writing in the late second or early third century AD, more than five hundred years after Pyrrho himself — who produced in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and his *Against the Professors* the most systematic, comprehensive, and intellectually careful presentation of radical skepticism that antiquity produced.

Sextus is important not because he added new arguments but because he preserved, in organized and accessible form, the full arsenal of Pyrrhonist reasoning that might otherwise have been lost. He also distinguished Pyrrhonism sharply from Academic Skepticism, and the distinction matters.

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## How the Two Traditions Differ — and Why Both Are Wrong

The Academic Skeptics said: we cannot achieve certainty, but we can identify more and less persuasive impressions and act on the more persuasive ones. They denied the possibility of knowledge but allowed a practical substitute.

The Pyrrhonists said: that concession to probability is already a philosophical surrender to dogmatism. True suspension of judgment means suspending judgment about everything, including probability itself, including the skeptical arguments themselves. The Pyrrhonist does not claim to know that nothing can be known. The Pyrrhonist claims only to be withholding judgment — on all things, in all directions, without remainder.

This distinction matters for what each tradition implies about how to live. The Academic, having accepted probability as a practical guide, can function in the world much as anyone else does — making decisions, forming preferences, pursuing goals, even arguing for philosophical positions (though with the caveat

that certainty is unavailable). Cicero, the most influential ancient representative of this tradition, was a prolific author, a practicing lawyer, a senator, and a figure of enormous practical consequence. His Academic Skepticism did not prevent him from doing things and caring about outcomes.

The Pyrrhonist ideal was different and much stranger. The goal of Pyrrhonism was *ataraxia* — tranquility, freedom from disturbance — achieved not through correct philosophical understanding of the world, as Epicurus achieved it, but through the progressive elimination of all judgment about the world. The Pyrrhonist sage who has truly achieved suspension of judgment on all matters is, in theory, no longer disturbed by anything, because disturbance presupposes caring about outcomes, and caring about outcomes presupposes judging that some outcomes are better than others, and that judgment is precisely what the Pyrrhonist has suspended.

The ancient critics of Pyrrhonism raised what seems like an obvious objection: how does the Pyrrhonist act at all? If you have genuinely suspended judgment about whether food is better than starvation, whether shelter is better than exposure, whether walking around obstacles is better than walking into them — how do you get through the day? The ancient legend that Pyrrho himself was so committed to his principles that he had to be rescued by companions from walking off cliffs (a story Diogenes Laertius reports) may be apocryphal, but it captures the logical problem precisely. The Pyrrhonists' answer was that they acted on appearances — not on judgments about appearances, but on the appearances themselves, following what seemed to present itself without committing to any view about what it really was. This was a clever response, but it was not a satisfying one, and Epicurus would have seen through it immediately: following appearances without making any judgment about them is not a description of how anyone actually acts. It is a verbal formula designed to make an impossible lifestyle sound coherent.

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## The Eastern Roots: What Was Really Imported

The connection between Pyrrhonism and Eastern philosophical traditions is worth examining carefully, because it shows clearly what the Pyrrhonist program is actually aimed at — and what is philosophically hazardous about it.

The Indian traditions that apparently influenced Pyrrho — whether Buddhist, Jain, or the Ajnanist tradition that explicitly advocated ignorance and the suspension of all views — share a common feature that is foreign to Greek philosophy in general and to Epicurean philosophy in particular: they treat the individual self as either illusory or as a source of suffering that must be dissolved or transcended. The Buddhist *anatta* doctrine holds that there is no permanent self. The Jain doctrine of *anekantavada* holds that all philosophical positions are partially true and partially false from different perspectives, making certainty on any view impossible. The *gymnosophist* ideal of the naked sage who has stripped away all material attachment extends to stripping away cognitive attachment as well — the belief in any particular view of the world.

What these traditions have in common is the identification of desire, judgment, and the sense of self as the source of suffering — and the prescription of their elimination as the cure. This is diametrically opposed to the Epicurean position. For Epicurus, desire is not the problem; empty and unlimited desire is the problem. Sensation is not the enemy; mistaken judgment layered on top of sensation is the enemy. The self is not an illusion to be dissolved; it is the seat of the pleasure and pain that constitute the only real measure of how well a life is going. The correction for false beliefs is better beliefs, not the dissolution of the capacity for belief. The cure for excessive desire is the pursuit of genuine goods, not the elimination of desire as such.

When Pyrrho returned from India and applied what he had apparently absorbed there to Greek philosophy, he was not discovering a Greek philosophical insight that had been waiting to be named. He was importing a framework that was alien to the Greek philosophical project at its most fundamental level — the project of understanding the world in order to live better in it. The Pyrrhonist goal of suspended judgment leading to tranquility is recognizable as a Greek transla-

tion of something like Buddhist nirvana: a state of absolute equanimity achieved by releasing all attachment to how things are. The problem is that such a state, if genuinely achieved, would be indistinguishable from death. A person who has truly ceased to judge that any outcome is better than any other has ceased to have preferences, and a person who has ceased to have preferences has ceased to be the kind of living creature whose wellbeing can go better or worse. The goal of Pyrrhonism, pursued consistently, terminates not in tranquility but in the philosophical equivalent of suicide.

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## What "Ataraxia" Actually Means — and Why the Pyrrhonists Stole the Word

Here is one of the most revealing points of contact between Pyrrhonism and Epicurean philosophy: both traditions use the word *ataraxia* — freedom from disturbance — as a description of something desirable. The Pyrrhonists claimed to achieve *ataraxia* through suspension of judgment. Epicurus described the desirability of living a life of pleasure with a mind free from groundless fear and a body free from unnecessary pain.

But these are completely different things given the same name. Epicurean *ataraxia* is a positive achievement — pleasure accompanied by freedom from disturbance that belongs to a person who has understood the world correctly, freed themselves from the fear of death and of the gods, identified what genuinely satisfies them, and built a life organized around those genuine goods. It is the tranquility of someone who is fully engaged with a life they understand and love. It is, crucially, not the primary goal of Epicurean philosophy — it is a description of what the full cup feels like from the inside. Pleasure remains the primary goal, and the absence of groundless disturbance is one component of the pleasurable life, not a substitute for it.

Pyrrhonist *ataraxia* is something else entirely: the emptiness of a person who has suspended all judgment, who no longer cares about outcomes, who has ceased to be disturbed by anything because they have ceased to care about anything. It is the tranquility of someone who has switched off the instruments that

would tell them how their life is going. It is, from the Epicurean standpoint, not philosophy but the philosophical performance of a kind of death.

The Pyrrhonist who holds up *ataraxia* as the destination and claims to have found a route to it through suspended judgment has, Epicurus would say, confused the map for the territory. The map shows a state of undisturbedness at the destination. The Pyrrhonist has found a different way to produce undisturbedness — by eliminating the sense that disturbance matters — and is claiming to have arrived. But the territory the map described was a life fully lived, not a life fully abandoned.

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## A Name Designed to Mislead: Why "Sextus Empiricus" Is Not an Empiricist

Before proceeding to the logical consequences of Pyrrhonism, one further confusion needs direct treatment — because it catches modern readers off guard and because it is exactly the kind of terminological trap that obscures rather than clarifies.

The name "Sextus Empiricus" sounds, to modern ears, like it describes a philosopher who believed that truth can be obtained through the senses — an empiricist in the modern sense, someone in the tradition of Locke or Hume or the broader scientific tradition that grounds knowledge in sensory observation. A reader encountering the name for the first time could easily assume they are dealing with a philosopher sympathetic to the Epicurean Canon, which also grounds knowledge in sensation. That assumption would be exactly wrong.

Sextus Empiricus was a radical skeptic who denied that reliable knowledge could be obtained through the senses or by any other means. He systematized the Pyrrhonist project of demonstrating that for every argument grounded in sensation, an equally compelling counter-argument could be constructed, and that the appropriate response to all sensory evidence was therefore suspension of judgment rather than any conclusion. The word "Empiricus" in his name has nothing to do with his epistemological commitments.

The label comes from his medical practice. Sextus was a physician, and he belonged to what ancient medicine called the "Empiric" school — one of the three main schools of ancient medicine alongside the Dogmatists and the Methodists. The Empiric school of medicine held that physicians should rely on observed clinical experience — what treatments had been seen to work in practice — rather than on theoretical speculation about the hidden causes of disease. This was a methodological position about medicine, not a philosophical position about the foundations of knowledge. Empiric physicians were skeptical of theoretical medicine, not skeptical of observation as such — their whole practice depended on accumulated clinical observation.

The irony, from an Epicurean standpoint, is pointed. The Empiric school of medicine came closer to genuine Epicurean epistemological principles than Sextus's philosophical Pyrrhonism did. When Sextus was practicing medicine, he was presumably acting on the kind of accumulated experiential knowledge — observations of symptoms, treatments, and outcomes — that Epicurean canonics treats as the proper foundation for reliable belief. When Sextus was writing philosophy, he was systematically arguing that no such foundation was possible. The physician and the philosopher were at war with each other under the same name.

The practical lesson for students of Epicurus: encountering the name "Sextus Empiricus" in philosophical discussion, do not let the "Empiricus" mislead you. This is not an ally of the Epicurean Canon. This is its most systematic and comprehensive ancient opponent. The "empirical" in his name describes his day job. His philosophical legacy is the polar opposite of empiricism in any meaningful sense.

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## The Logical Consequences of Radical Skepticism: Inaction, Nihilism, and the Wasted Life

Let us follow the Pyrrhonist program to its actual conclusion, which its clever ancient defenders were careful never to make explicit.

If you have genuinely suspended judgment about whether pleasure is better than pain — and the Pyrrhonist must suspend this judgment, because to affirm it would be to commit to a dogmatic position — then you have suspended the natural guidance system that every human being is born with. Nature provides pleasure and pain as the instruments by which living creatures navigate toward what is genuinely good for them and away from what harms them. These instruments are not optional. They are not recommendations. They are the basic biological and psychological equipment of a living creature with a good life to pursue or miss.

The Pyrrhonist who suspends judgment on whether pleasure is better than pain has not achieved a philosophically superior neutrality. They have disabled their compass and called the resulting disorientation enlightenment.

What follows from disabled navigation? Not the pleasure of undisturbedness in any meaningful sense. What follows is one of three things. The first is covert action according to unacknowledged preferences — the Pyrrhonist sage who claims to have no views quietly eats when hungry and avoids fire, following their actual biological preferences while maintaining the philosophical pretense of suspended judgment. This is what Sextus Empiricus described as acting on appearances without committing to judgments about them — a formula that conceals continued ordinary action behind philosophical camouflage. The second possibility is genuine paralysis — inability to act because all grounds for preferring one action to another have been suspended. The Pyrrhonist legends of Pyrrho needing to be rescued from cliff edges belong to this territory. The third is despair — the recognition that if no outcome is better than any other, then the project of living a good life is incoherent, and nothing about one's situation can warrant the energy of engagement.

None of these deserves the name of ataraxia. The first is self-deception. The second is dysfunction. The third is nihilism.

Vatican Saying 14 captures the Epicurean response to all of this with the directness the situation demands: "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 without allowing himself leisure."[1]

The Academic Skeptic who settles for probability and defers action pending certainty that will never come has worn away some part of the one life available. The Pyrrhonist who has dissolved the very framework within which action could be intelligently directed has worn away all of it. Both traditions, in different ways and to different degrees, make the same fundamental error: they treat the absence of certainty as a philosophical problem requiring a philosophical solution, rather than recognizing it as the normal condition of a living creature who must act now, with the instruments nature has provided, in the world that exists.

Epicurus had no patience for this performance. The Canon provides the instruments. Sensation reports accurately what it reports. The anticipations nature builds through experience allow reliable recognition of genuine goods and genuine harms. The feelings of pleasure and pain tell you, without the mediation of any philosophical theory, how your life is going and what direction it needs to move in. None of this requires certainty in the impossible sense the skeptics demand. It requires only the honesty to accept what nature provides and the courage to act on it.

The skeptics — Academic and Pyrrhonist alike — were performing an escape from that honesty. They had found, in different philosophical vocabularies, ways to avoid the recognition that you are alive, that your life has a direction, that some choices are genuinely better than others, and that the time to make them is now. Epicurus refused to join that escape. And he was right to refuse.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Beyond the Monkees: How Epicurus Adds Color to Shades of Gray

In 1967, the band known as "The Monkees" recorded a song for their *Headquarters* album that was, without intending to, a precise description of the philosophical disease that Epicurus had diagnosed and treated two thousand years earlier. The song was "Shades of Gray," written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, and its subject was the loss of certainty.

The song's speaker looks back on childhood as a time when everything was clear. It was easy then to tell right from wrong, weak from strong, when to stand and fight. The answers seemed obvious. Doubt had not yet arrived. Then something happened — call it experience, or education, or the accumulated weight of a more complex world — and the clarity dissolved. Now there is no day or night, no dark or light, no black or white. Only shades of gray.

The song is not a celebration of sophistication. It is a lament. The speaker has not gained something by moving into the gray. He has lost something — the ability to navigate, to choose, to love and hate with confidence, to tell truth from lies and selling out from genuine compromise. He has lost, in short, the capacity to live a directed life. And he does not know how to get it back.

Epicurus knew exactly what had happened to him. And he knew exactly what to do about it.

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## The Disease Has a Name

The philosophical tradition that produces the Shades of Gray experience is not a modern invention. It is ancient, systematic, and — Epicurus argued — cata-

strophically wrong. In the ancient world it was eventually given the name Academic Skepticism, and its practitioners were among the most influential philosophers in the ancient world. Their followers continue to reign supreme today.

The Skeptical tradition, in its various forms, held that reliable knowledge is impossible. The senses deceive us. Our perceptions are subjective. What appears true to one person appears false to another. The same water feels warm to one hand and cold to another. The same tower looks round from a distance and square up close. The same action seems just to one observer and unjust to another. From observations like these, the Skeptics drew a sweeping conclusion: since our faculties of perception and judgment are inherently unreliable, the rational response is to suspend all judgment. Do not commit to any belief. Hold all conclusions lightly. Acknowledge that you cannot know.

The Academic Skeptics of the New Academy — Arcesilaus and Carneades in particular — turned this into a full philosophical program. They argued that for every argument on one side of any question, an equally compelling argument could be constructed on the other, and that the wise response was therefore to commit to nothing. The Skeptic philosopher was presented as the model of intellectual honesty: humble, non-dogmatic, perpetually open, never pinned down, in the words of Cicero, the only man who is truly free.

This is the philosophy that produces the Shades of Gray experience. The person who has absorbed — consciously or through cultural osmosis — the Skeptic premise that certainty is impossible and all judgment is suspect, ends up exactly where the Monkees' speaker finds himself: unable to tell right from wrong, truth from lies, who to love from who to hate. Not because the world has become genuinely more ambiguous, but because the philosophical tools that would allow him to navigate it have been taken away and replaced with a shrug.

Epicurus did not respond to this tradition with a shrug of his own. He responded with fury.

The Epicurean answer to the Skeptics on this point was stated with such force and clarity that one of the philosophy's most devoted ancient followers — Diogenes of Oinoanda, a man who felt so strongly about spreading the Epicurean message that he had it inscribed on a public wall in his city for passersby to read for free — chose to preserve it in stone. In Fragment 5 of that inscription, Dio-

genes transmits the Epicurean analysis of the Skeptical move in terms Epicurus himself might have written: some Skeptics openly dismiss the study of nature as useless, while others — the more subtle variety — take a subtler route, claiming that things are inapprehensible, which amounts to the same thing. As Diogenes put it: "when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?"[1]

Then comes the passage that should be carved over the door of every philosophy department that has made peace with perpetual uncertainty — and which Diogenes evidently agreed was worth carving into a wall:

*"We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing is at no time apprehensible by sense-perception."*[2]

This is the Epicurean position stated with perfect economy. Yes, things change. Yes, the world is in flux. The Epicurean is not naive about this. But the Skeptics — Diogenes names Aristotle and the Peripatetics, but the Epicurean argument applies equally to the Socratics, the Platonists, and every other tradition that used the fact of change as a license for surrendering the possibility of knowledge — have dramatically overplayed their hand. The flux is real. The claim that it is so rapid that nothing can ever be known is not. And the decisive rebuttal is this: the Skeptics themselves, when they say "this is white and that is black, but at another time neither this is white nor that black," are presupposing knowledge of what white and black are. They could not make even their skeptical argument without prior knowledge of the nature of the things they claim cannot be known. The position is self-refuting — and Diogenes judged this Epicurean insight worth preserving in stone.

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## Epicurus's Diagnosis: This Is Not Wisdom. It Is a Disease.

The Skeptic presents himself as the intellectually responsible party — the one who, unlike the "dogmatists," refuses to claim more than he can justify. Epicurus saw through this immediately. The Skeptic's humility is not honest. It is a per-

formance that makes genuine living impossible and then congratulates itself for the impossibility.

Consider what the Shades of Gray speaker has actually lost. He cannot tell truth from lies. He cannot identify who deserves love and who deserves contempt. He cannot determine what is fair, when to protect his heart, how much to care. These are not abstract philosophical questions. They are the questions on which every decision of a real life depends. A person who genuinely cannot answer them cannot direct their life at all. They are at the mercy of whoever or whatever is pushing them at any given moment, because they have no internal compass left.

This, Epicurus says, is not the mark of philosophical depth. It is the result of a philosophical error — a specific error about how knowledge works — and its practical consequence is not liberation from dogmatism but paralysis. The Skeptic has not freed himself from false certainty. He has freed himself from the possibility of living intelligently, which is a much greater loss.

The Letter to Menoeceus begins with the declaration that it is never too early or too late to begin philosophizing, because the health of the soul is at stake at every age. The Shades of Gray speaker has a sick soul. Not because the world has become genuinely unknowable, but because someone — some philosophical tradition, some cultural atmosphere — has convinced him that his natural faculties of knowledge cannot be trusted. Epicurus's answer begins by restoring confidence in those faculties. Not false confidence. Earned confidence, grounded in a precise account of how knowledge actually works.



## The Canon: Nature's Answer to the Shades of Gray

Epicurus called his theory of knowledge the *Canon* — from the Greek word for a straight edge, a ruler, a standard of measurement. The name is deliberate. Against the Skeptic who says there is no reliable standard, Epicurus says: there is. Nature provided it. You were born with it. The problem is not that you lack the tools to navigate reality. The problem is that you have been talked out of trusting them.

The Canon identifies three criteria of truth — three sources of reliable knowledge that, taken together, give a person everything needed to navigate the world accurately.

**The first criterion is sensation.** Every sensation, Epicurus argues, is true as a report of what it reports. The senses do not lie about what they are experiencing. The water that feels warm to one hand and cold to another is not evidence that sensation is unreliable — it is evidence that the two hands are reporting different temperatures. The sensation is an accurate report of the relationship between that hand and that water at that moment. The error, when error occurs, is not in the sensation but in the interpretation — in the judgment we layer on top of it. Epicurus is very precise here: sensations are reliable; our *opinions* about what they mean can be wrong. And the correction for mistaken opinion is not to abandon sensation but to gather more sensations and form better opinions.

This immediately addresses one prong of the Shades of Gray despair. The speaker feels that he can no longer tell light from dark, day from night. But he can. His eyes report accurately what they report. The problem is not that sensation has failed him. The problem is that he has been taught to distrust the reports his senses give him — to insert a layer of philosophical doubt between himself and his direct experience of reality. Epicurus removes that layer and says: trust what you see. Correct your interpretations when they prove wrong. But the seeing itself is reliable.

**The second criterion is anticipations** (the Greek *prolēpsis*) — general concepts that nature inscribes in the mind through repeated experience, which allow us to recognize and categorize what we encounter. When you see something for the first time and immediately recognize it as an animal, or as hostile, or as beautiful, or as food — that recognition is not purely the product of the individual sensation. It draws on an anticipation, a pre-formed concept that has been built up through all your prior relevant experience and that allows the new sensation to be understood rather than merely registered.

This is the most powerful of Epicurus's answers to the Shades of Gray despair, and it is the one most completely suppressed by the Skeptical tradition. The speaker laments that he can no longer tell the foolish from the wise, who to love from who to hate, truth from lies. Epicurus says: you have a faculty precisely cal-

ibrated by nature for exactly these recognitions. The anticipations of justice, of trustworthiness, of wisdom, of love — these are not arbitrary cultural constructs or subjective preferences. They are concepts that nature builds into minds through experience, that allow us to recognize their referents reliably when we encounter them. A person of genuine experience and honest attention can tell the foolish from the wise, because wisdom has characteristics that these anticipations register — not perfectly, not infallibly, but reliably enough to direct a life.

The Skeptic says: your judgment about who is wise could be wrong, therefore you cannot trust it. Epicurus says: yes, any particular judgment can be wrong, and the correction is to accumulate more experience, apply your anticipations more carefully, and revise when the evidence warrants. But the response to fallibility is not suspension of all judgment. The response to fallibility is better judgment. A man who refuses to eat because he might someday make a mistake about what is food is not being epistemically responsible. He is starving himself to death in the name of intellectual humility.

**The third criterion is feelings of pleasure and pain** * — the Greek word *pathē* refers to the feelings of pleasure and pain that nature has provided as the fundamental evaluative instruments. This is the criterion that applies most directly to the practical despair of the song. The speaker has lost the ability to know how much to care, when to protect his heart, how much to share. He has lost, in other words, confidence in his own feelings as guides.

Epicurus restores that confidence by grounding it in nature itself. Pleasure is not a subjective preference that varies arbitrarily from moment to moment and person to person with no common standard. It is the signal nature uses to mark genuine goods — things that are actually good for living creatures of our kind. Pain is the signal nature uses to mark genuine harms. These signals are not infallible — out minds can fail to recognize false beliefs, the pursuit of empty desires, the confusion of pleasures whose long-term costs outweigh their present returns. But the response to mistaken choice and avoidance is calibration, not abandonment of the signals of pleasure and pain. You learn to read your feelings more accurately by understanding which choices are achievable and actually lead to more pleasure than pain. You do not learn to navigate by throwing away your compass.

The person who has lost confidence in their feelings as guides — who has been told that love and hate are equally arbitrary, that the sense of fairness is a cultural construction, that there is no real difference between protecting your heart appropriately and protecting it excessively — is the person the Skeptical tradition has disarmed. Epicurus re-arms them. Your feelings of pleasure and pain are nature speaking to you directly. Learn to hear them accurately, filter out the distortions introduced by false beliefs, and what remains is the most reliable practical guidance available to a living creature.

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## Seven Complaints, Seven Answers

The song's speaker raises seven specific contrasts that he can no longer make — seven dimensions of clarity he has lost. Each one receives a direct answer from the Epicurean tradition.

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### 1. Telling Right from Wrong

The song's speaker remembers when it was easy to tell right from wrong. Now it is not. The Skeptic's contribution to this confusion is the claim that moral judgments are merely cultural conventions with no basis in nature, and that different peoples in different places hold incompatible moral views, none of which can be declared correct.

Epicurus answers with a theory of justice grounded not in convention but in nature. Principal Doctrine 31 states the foundation: "Natural justice is a compact resulting from expediency, to prevent mutual harm and have mutual benefit."[3] And Principal Doctrine 33 extends it: "Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another in any place whatever and at any time it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed."[4]

This is not moral relativism. It is something more precise: justice is the recognition, available to every functioning human mind, of what harms and what benefits in relationships between people. It is not handed down by gods or written into the structure of the universe — but it is not arbitrary either. It follows from

the nature of pleasure and pain as real, shared features of all human experience. Every person can be harmed. Every person can benefit. The compact that prevents mutual harm and provides mutual benefit is discernible by reason applied to those facts.

Vatican Saying 7 adds the practical point: "It is not easy for a man to do wrong and escape detection; but to feel confident that he will escape detection is impossible."[5] The wrongdoer who tells himself that no one will know is not only wrong about social consequences. He is wrong about himself. The feelings of pleasure and pain do not go silent after a wrong act. They report accurately. The person who has done wrong knows it, at the level of sensation, even when they refuse to acknowledge it at the level of opinion. Right from wrong is not gray. It is felt.

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## 2. Telling Weak from Strong

The song's second lost distinction is between weakness and strength. This one is subtler, because the Skeptical atmosphere has made it fashionable to distrust any clear account of what strength of character actually consists of — either reducing it to mere physical power (which is obviously not what the song means) or dissolving it into a relativism where every mode of being is equally valid.

Epicurus is precise about strength. Genuine strength is not the capacity to dominate others or accumulate more than you need. It is the capacity to direct your own life according to reason and to maintain that direction under pressure. The wise man described in Diogenes Laertius Book 10 is not stronger than others because he has more resources or fewer difficulties. He is stronger because he has freed himself from the false beliefs and empty desires that make ordinary people the slaves of their circumstances.

Lucretius makes this contrast vivid in *De Rerum Natura*. The person in the grip of ambition, of the fear of death, of unlimited appetite — that person is weak, however much power they may command, because they are not directing themselves. They are being driven. The Epicurean who has applied reason to his desires, who knows what he genuinely needs and what he does not, who has freed

himself from the fear of death and the anxiety about divine punishment — that person is genuinely strong, because the direction of his life is in his own hands.

This is not a gray distinction. The weak person is visible: anxious, driven by fears they have not examined, pursuing goods they will never find sufficient, at the mercy of fortune because they have placed their happiness where fortune can reach it. The strong person is also visible: calm without being passive, directed without being rigid, capable of genuine engagement because they are not spending their energy on unnecessary defenses. The anticipation of strength — built through observation of how people actually function — makes this distinction reliably.

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### 3. When to Stand and Fight or Just Go Along

The third complaint is about practical judgment under pressure: when does a situation call for resistance and when for accommodation? The Shades of Gray speaker no longer trusts his judgment on this question. The Skeptical atmosphere has told him that the difference between principled resistance and mere stubbornness is a matter of perspective, that the difference between genuine compromise and selling out is ultimately arbitrary.

Epicurus, and the Epicureans who followed him, were not confused about this. The ancient record is explicit. Cassius Longinus grounded his decision to resist Caesar's consolidation of power in his Epicurean philosophy — not as an abstract political position but as the recognition that the conditions of a genuinely good life, including political freedom and the rule of law, were worth acting to preserve. This is not the behavior of a philosopher who believed that going along was always the wiser option.

The criterion is not difficult to state, though it requires genuine courage to apply. Principal Doctrine 40 provides part of the framework: those who have secured genuine protection from others have thereby lived the most pleasurable life together, and have enjoyed the fullest guarantee of security.[6] When going along destroys the genuine goods — the friendships, the freedom, the conditions of a flourishing life — that are worth preserving, then going along is the error, not the wisdom. When the cost of resistance is genuine and the benefit uncer-

tain, the prudential calculation may point the other way. But the calculation is real and can be made.

Vatican Saying 56-57 captures the Epicurean willingness to act decisively when the situation warrants: the wise man, Epicurus says, will on occasion die for a friend.[7] That is not the posture of a man who defaults to going along. It is the posture of a man who has clear values, clear relationships, and clear recognition of when those values and relationships demand action rather than accommodation. The distinction between standing firm and going along is not gray. It requires judgment, and judgment requires the Canon — but the judgment is available to anyone willing to apply it honestly.

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**4. Truth from Lies**

This is the Skeptic's home territory — the domain where the tradition does the most damage. The argument runs: our senses sometimes deceive us, our memories are imperfect, our interpretations are influenced by our interests and preconceptions, and therefore we cannot reliably distinguish true from false. The honest response is to suspend judgment, hold all conclusions lightly, acknowledge that certainty is beyond reach.

Epicurus demolishes this argument at its root. The refutation appears in Diogenes Laertius Book 10: if all sensations are untrustworthy, then the very sensation-based argument that all sensations are untrustworthy is itself untrustworthy — and the Skeptic's position is self-refuting. You cannot use an argument that depends on the reliability of sensation to prove that sensation is unreliable.

What Epicurus proposes instead is not naive credulity but a rigorous method. Principal Doctrine 24 states it precisely: "If you reject any single sensation, and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion, as to the appearance awaiting confirmation, and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations as well with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment."[8] Sensation is the foundation. The error occurs in the opinion we form on top of the sensation — and the correction is to check the opinion against further sensation, not to abandon sensation altogether.

Philodemus's *De Signis* (On Signs) extends this into inference. We know things we cannot directly observe — atoms, the nature of distant places, the character of people we have not yet met — through inference from signs that we can observe. Philodemus defends the method of inference thoroughly: when certain observable characteristics consistently accompany certain unobservable ones in our experience, we are justified in inferring the unobservable from the observable. This is not a claim of omniscient absolute certainty. But it is reliable knowledge — reliable enough to navigate with.

Truth from lies is distinguishable. The method is: check against sensation, check against further sensation, apply the anticipation built from accumulated experience, use inference from signs where direct observation is unavailable. The Skeptic who says this produces no reliable verdicts has never actually tried it — or has redefined "reliable" to mean "infallible," which no human being has ever achieved and which is not required for a well-directed life.

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**5. Selling Out from Compromise**

This is one of the most practically important distinctions in the song, and one of the most deeply obscured by the Skeptical atmosphere. If all values are relative and all judgments subjective, then the distinction between a genuine compromise (in which something real is given to get something real) and a sell-out (in which something real is surrendered for nothing, or for something that has no genuine value) collapses. Everything becomes negotiable. The person who holds firm to something becomes "rigid." The person who gives ground on everything becomes "flexible." The difference between integrity and its absence disappears into gray.

Epicurus draws this line clearly, and the Epicurean tradition's insistence on frank speech, the willingness to say what is true even when it is inconvenient — is the practical expression of where the line falls.

Diogenes Laertius records in Book 10 that the Epicurean sage "will not flatter anyone." This is not a minor detail. It is the core of the distinction. The person who adjusts their expressed views to please whoever is in front of them, who tells each audience what it wants to hear, who trades honesty for social comfort or ad-

vantage — that person has sold out. The compromise that Epicurus endorses is the genuine one: giving up something of genuine but lesser value to secure something of genuine and greater value. What he categorically rejects is the exchange of honesty itself for social benefit.

Philodemus's *On Frank Criticism* builds an entire treatise on this distinction within the Epicurean community. The teacher who flatters the student rather than correcting them is not being kind. They are failing the student — harming them by withholding the frank assessment that would actually help. The friend who tells you what you want to hear rather than what is true is not a friend. The person who holds back honest criticism out of social anxiety has compromised something that should not be compromised.

The Epicurean test for sell-out versus compromise is: what was actually exchanged, and what is the genuine value of each side? Genuine compromise trades one real good for another real good. Selling out trades something of real value — honesty, principle, genuine friendship — for something that has no genuine value: approval, temporary comfort, the avoidance of an unpleasant moment. Your feelings report the difference accurately. The person who has sold out knows it. The feeling is not gray.

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### 6. Who to Love and Who to Hate

Of all the song's lost distinctions, this is the one most directly addressed by the Epicurean tradition, because friendship was not a peripheral concern of Epicurean philosophy. It was central — one of the three greatest goods, alongside freedom from fear and philosophical understanding.

Principal Doctrine 27 is unambiguous: "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship."[9] This is not a sentiment. It is a philosophical claim: friendship is, among all the goods that wisdom can produce, the greatest. It follows that the ability to recognize who is genuinely worthy of friendship — and who is not — is one of the most important practical capacities a person can develop.

Epicurus and the tradition are specific about what distinguishes the person worthy of love from the person who should be met with wariness or contempt. Vatican Saying 28 states the active dimension: "We must not approve either those who are always ready for friendship, or those who hang back, but for friendship's sake we must even run risks."[10] The person always ready for friendship with everyone is not a friend — they are a social operator whose "friendship" follows no genuine assessment of worth. The person who hangs back from all engagement is equally wrong. Genuine friendship requires genuine risk — the willingness to invest, knowing that investment can be lost.

Vatican Saying 34 provides the criterion: "We do not need a friend for the sake of his help so much as for the confidence of his help."[11] The genuine friend is not the person who has provided the most services. It is the person whose reliability — whose genuine care for your wellbeing, demonstrated through consistent action over time — has earned the confidence that they can be counted on. This is observable. It is built through experience. The anticipation of trustworthiness, refined through the record of actual behavior, makes it discernible.

Diogenes of Oinoanda, in his great wall inscription, extends this to the wider community of those who share Epicurean philosophy. He writes that he has inscribed his message publicly not merely for his contemporaries but for those who come after — because the community of those who genuinely love wisdom and pursue a life of genuine pleasure, across all times and places, constitutes a kind of friendship that transcends any individual relationship. To love those who pursue truth and genuine living, to be wary of those who pursue only power and empty reputation — this is not gray. It is the most important discrimination a person makes.

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### 7. The Foolish from the Wise

The seventh and final distinction is the one from which all the others flow, because the ability to tell the foolish from the wise is the ability to identify whose counsel to follow, whose example to emulate, whose community to seek. Lose this, and all the other discriminations become harder. The Skeptical atmosphere is particularly damaging here, because it has become fashionable to treat anyone

who expresses clear conviction as naive, while treating perpetual uncertainty as the mark of wisdom.

Epicurus rejects this entirely. The *Letter to Menoeceus* describes the wise man with precision — and the description is not a portrait of someone suspended in doubt. The wise man understands that pleasure is the goal and applies that understanding consistently. He has freed himself from the fear of death by genuinely understanding mortality. He has learned to distinguish natural desires from empty ones and pursues the former while dismissing the latter. He applies prudence — practical wisdom — to the calculation of what genuinely maximizes pleasure over time. He maintains genuine friendships. He is, in short, a person who has figured something out and lives accordingly.

Diogenes Laertius records the characteristics of Epicurean wisdom in detail in Book 10. The wise man not be ungrateful. The wise man will feel genuine gratitude to those who have benefited him. The wise man will grieve for the death of friends while maintaining philosophical understanding of mortality. The wise man will speak frankly. The wise man will not flatter. The wise man will not be driven by ambition for political power. The wise man will not accumulate wealth beyond genuine need.

This is not an impossible standard. It is a description of recognizable characteristics — characteristics that, when present, mark a person as genuinely wise, and when absent, mark them as still in the grip of the errors that produce a diminished life. The fool pursues empty goods: reputation, unlimited wealth, power for its own sake, pleasures whose costs consistently outweigh their returns. The fool is driven by fears — of death, of divine punishment, of other people's opinions — that a clearer understanding of the world would dissolve. The fool calls his lack of conviction "open-mindedness" and his inability to commit "wisdom."

Vatican Saying 54 captures the Epicurean insistence on the reality of this distinction: "We must not pretend to philosophize, but philosophize in reality; for it is not the appearance of health that we need, but real health."[12] The person who talks philosophy without living it is not a philosopher. They are a person performing wisdom while remaining in the grip of the errors that wisdom would dissolve. The difference between the genuine philosopher and the performer is

visible — not always immediately, but through the accumulated record of how they actually live and what they actually pursue.

The foolish and the wise are not gray. They are, in the fullest sense, different colors.

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## The Specific Tradition Epicurus Was Fighting

It is worth naming the philosophical tradition Epicurus was combating directly, because it was not merely an abstract error. While the source of the error is traceable back to Socrates and Plato and even further back, after Epicurus' death the Academic Skeptics — particularly Arcesilaus and Carneades, who led the Platonic Academy in the third and second centuries BC — turned skepticism into a fierce rhetorical weapon. Their method was to take any philosophical position their opponent held and construct an equally compelling argument for the opposite, demonstrating that no position could be maintained with certainty. This was intellectually dazzling. It was also, as the Epicureans argued, catastrophically irresponsible.

Epicurus's objection was not that the Skeptics were unintelligent. It was that they had built a philosophical system designed to leave human beings without the tools they need to live. If you cannot trust sensation, you cannot eat safely. If you cannot form reliable anticipations, you cannot recognize friends from enemies, safe from dangerous, nourishing from poisonous. If you cannot trust your feelings, you have no instrument for evaluating what is genuinely good for you. The Skeptic has not achieved philosophical liberation. He has achieved philosophical helplessness and dressed it in the vocabulary of intellectual virtue.

Epicurus was also combating the variant form of this error that shows up in popular culture in every generation — not the sophisticated Academic Skepticism of the schools but the diffuse cultural skepticism that convinces ordinary people that their natural faculties of judgment cannot be trusted, that all values are relative, that the confidence of youth was innocent illusion and adult sophistication means knowing that nothing is really knowable. This is the atmosphere the Monkees' song captured. The Monkees likely had not read Carneades. They had

absorbed a culture. But the disease is the same, and Epicurus's cure addresses both the academic and the popular version with equal precision.

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## The Wall in Oinoanda — and the Answer It Still Gives

Before closing, it is worth returning to Fragment 5 and to what Diogenes of Oinoanda chose to preserve in stone — because the Epicurean answer he transmitted is not merely a technical philosophical rebuttal. It is exactly what the Shades of Gray speaker needs to hear, stated plainly, with compassion and without condescension.

Diogenes was not a philosopher who invented new doctrines. He was a devoted transmitter of the Epicurean philosophy who felt so strongly about its importance — particularly its answer to the Skeptics — that he spent what must have been a considerable sum having it inscribed on a public wall so that anyone walking past could read it without cost. That Fragment 5 survived at all is because Diogenes judged the Epicurean answer to the "everything is flux therefore nothing is knowable" argument important enough to put in stone. He was right.

The Skeptic — academic or popular, ancient or modern, trained in the schools or simply absorbing a culture — has a single move: things change, therefore nothing is knowable, therefore no discrimination can be made with confidence, therefore all is gray. The sophistication varies. The move is always the same.

The Epicurean answer, as Diogenes preserved it, is: you are right that things change. We acknowledge the flux. What you have not established — what you cannot establish — is that the flux is so rapid that using sense-perception and anticipations we cannot grasp the nature of things at any moment. And then the decisive point: you are already using knowledge of the nature of things in order to make your argument that the nature of things cannot be known. You know what white is. You know what black is. That is how you can say they shift. The gray you claim to inhabit is intelligible to you only because you have already grasped the colors.

Applied to the song's despair: the person who mourns that they can no longer tell right from wrong, truth from lies, the foolish from the wise — that person is

using knowledge of what right, truth, and wisdom are in order to notice their absence. The despair is itself evidence of the capacity it claims to have lost. You could not grieve the gray if you had never seen the colors. The Epicurean answer is not to supply that capacity from outside. It is to point out that it was never gone — only suppressed by a culture saturated by a philosophical tradition invested in convincing you that it was.

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## Adding Color

The Shades of Gray speaker ends where he began: lost in gray, without the capacity to distinguish, unable to commit. The song offers no resolution because the tradition it unknowingly inhabits offers none. Skepticism, consistently applied, has no exit. If your faculties of judgment are fundamentally unreliable, then the judgment that they are unreliable is itself unreliable — and you are left in an infinite regress with no ground anywhere.

Epicurus's *Canon* breaks the regress by identifying the ground. It is not a philosophical construct. It is nature itself — the sensation, the anticipations, the feelings that every human being is born with and that every human being uses every day, whether they acknowledge it or not. The Skeptic who claims to suspend all judgment still eats when hungry, still recoils from what hurts, still recognizes their friends — because nature has not waited for philosophical permission to install the instruments. The *Canon* does not create these instruments. It identifies and defends them.

What Epicurus adds, in practice, is exactly what the song's speaker has lost: confidence. Not the naive confidence of childhood, which had not yet been tested. Earned confidence — the recognition that your faculties of knowledge, understood correctly and applied honestly, are reliable enough to direct a life. That sensation tells you the truth about what it reports. That accumulated experience builds genuine recognition of what is wise, trustworthy, just, and worthy of love. That the feelings of pleasure and pain, filtered through reason and calibrated by experience, point reliably toward genuine goods and away from genuine harms.

Right from wrong: discernible. Truth from lies: distinguishable. The foolish from the wise: recognizable. How much to care: determinable. None of these perfectly, none without the possibility of error and revision. But reliably enough to live fully, to love with conviction, to hate what genuinely deserves hatred, to stand and fight when standing and fighting is what the situation warrants.

The world is not gray. It is complex — genuinely, irreducibly complex, full of situations that require careful judgment and honest application of all three criteria together. But complexity is not the same as indistinguishability. The palette is not limited to gray. Epicurus hands back the full range of colors and says: here is how to see them accurately. Here is what nature gave you to see with. Here is why you can trust it.

That is not the confidence of someone who has never doubted. It is the confidence of someone who has understood what doubting is for — not a permanent destination but a stage in the process of forming better beliefs — and has come out the other side with tools that work.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# In An AI World, The Epicurean View of Knowledge Is More Important Than Ever

Epicurus had important things to say about happiness, pleasure, fear, and anxiety. But before the modern world reduced him to the status of a street-corner therapist, his most important contributions to human advancement were understood to be in a very different field — that of understanding reality, and the true nature of things. The ancient world recognized that Epicurus's account of how knowledge is possible was among the most significant and original contributions any philosopher had ever made. It is time to recognize that again.

The reason is not merely academic. Advanced artificial intelligence technology is making it increasingly difficult to trust what we see and hear in the world around us. Audio and video can be generated that is indistinguishable, to direct observation, from recorded reality. Images of people, events, and places can be fabricated that human senses cannot reliably distinguish from genuine photographs. There is little doubt that as the technology matures, the generation of convincing synthetic taste, touch, and smell experiences will follow. We are entering a world in which the question "can I trust what my senses are telling me?" is no longer a philosophical puzzle reserved for academic discussion. It is a practical daily challenge.

When we think about what our response to this new world will be, we can predict three broad categories of reaction. The first is despair: no sensations can be trusted, and there is no way in any given situation to be certain whether what the senses are reporting is true or false. The second is the claim to a privileged criterion: some sensations are so clear and sharp, or some authority so reliable, that they are unmistakably true. The third is confidence based on understanding: all

sensations can be trusted to report what they report, and what our minds do with those reports is where the question of truth and falsehood actually resides.

These three positions were identified and argued in the ancient world more than two thousand years before AI existed. Their broad outlines remain the only available options today. And the one that was right in the ancient world — the one that Epicurus developed against both the Skeptics and the Stoics — is the one that offers genuine guidance in ours.

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## The Three Ancient Positions and What They Mean Today

The first position — that no sensations can be trusted — was the position of the Radical and Academic Skeptics: the heirs of what Socrates and Plato had introduced, extended through Pyrrho of Elis and eventually systematized by Sextus Empiricus in the second century AD. The Academic Skeptics, working from within Plato's own Academy, argued that no sensory impression could carry its own guarantee of accuracy — and that therefore the only honest response to any question was suspension of judgment. The Pyrrhonists pushed this further, extending suspension of judgment to the skeptical claim itself, producing a position of total philosophical paralysis.

In an AI world, this position maps directly onto the response of those who conclude that because synthetic media cannot always be distinguished from genuine media, nothing can be reliably known from sensory experience. Every report, every video, every image, every witness account must be suspended pending some standard of verification that is never itself secure. The result is the exact paralysis that Epicurus identified in the ancient Skeptics: a life without the possibility of confident judgment, without urgency, without the capacity to act on reliable knowledge. A world in which AI has convinced us that nothing can be known is a world in which the Skeptics have won — and Epicurus understood that the Skeptic victory is not philosophical honesty but philosophical suicide.

The second position — that some sensations are so clear they can be trusted — was the position of the Stoics, who developed their theory of knowledge around what they called the "kataleptic impression." This was an impression so clear and

distinct, the Stoics argued, that it carried its own internal guarantee of accuracy. The Skeptics' most devastating argument against the Stoics — that no impression can satisfy this standard because hallucinations, dreams, and deceptions produce impressions qualitatively identical to genuine ones — applies with equal force in the AI context: if artificially generated images are perceptually indistinguishable from genuine ones, the criterion of clarity cannot separate true from false. The kataleptic impression is not a standard that survives the challenge of AI-generated media.

The same logic applies to any modern equivalent of the Stoic position: the claim that some authority — a government certification, a platform's content moderation, a blockchain verification, a chain of custody document — can sort genuine from synthetic on our behalf. Whatever the authority, it is itself capable of being deceived, fabricated, or corrupted. Delegating the problem of knowledge to an external certifying authority is the modern equivalent of delegating it to the Stoics' dialectical logic — it multiplies the problem rather than solving it. This was always the Epicurean critique of the Stoic approach: its obsessive resort to dialectic, syllogisms, and formal logic produce results that are as unsatisfactory as they are inaccessible to ordinary people.

The third position — that all sensations can be trusted to report honestly what they report, and that truth and falsehood reside in the mind's interpretation of those reports rather than in the sensations themselves — is the Epicurean position. It is the one that remains standing after both the Skeptic and the Stoic have been refuted. And it is the one that offers genuine guidance in the age of AI.

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## What Epicurus Understood About Sensation

The foundation of Epicurus's account of knowledge is stated directly by Diogenes Laertius, drawing on Epicurus's lost work *The Canon*:

> In *The Canon* Epicurus states that the sensations, the preconceptions (*prolēpseis*), and the feelings (*pathē*) are the criteria of truth. (*Diogenes Laertius*, X.31)[1]

These three natural faculties — the five senses, the anticipations built by accumulated experience, and the feelings of pleasure and pain — are what nature has provided to every living creature from birth as the instruments for navigating reality. They are not the result of philosophical training or rational discipline. They are given. Philosophy's task is not to replace them with something else but to prevent false opinion from corrupting them.

The central claim about sensation is both radical and precisely formulated. Sensation, Epicurus held, is always true — but this does not mean what its critics have taken it to mean. It does not mean that every impression accurately represents the external object that caused it. It means that sensation, as a physical process, reports honestly and accurately what it receives. As Sextus Empiricus records the Epicurean position:

> Sensation, being perceptive of the objects presented to it and neither subtracting nor adding nor transposing — being devoid of reason — constantly reports truly and grasps the existent object as it really is by nature. (*Sextus Empiricus*, Against the Logicians M VII.369, drawing on Epicurean sources)

The key phrase is "neither subtracting nor adding nor transposing."[2] Sensation does not interpret, select, or rearrange what it receives. It is, in Norman DeWitt's formulation in *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, "irrational" — not in a pejorative sense but in the precise sense that it operates entirely below the level of rational judgment. And precisely because it does not judge, it cannot misjudge. Only the mind, when it adds its own opinion to the raw report of sensation, introduces the possibility of error.

Diogenes Laertius records the same principle from the *Letter to Herodotus*:

> All sensation is irrational and does not admit of memory; for it is not set in motion by itself, nor, when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it. (*Diogenes Laertius*, X.31)[3]

This is the Epicurean answer to the bent oar and the tower that appears round from a distance. The oar in the water looks bent — and that sensation is true. It accurately reports what occurred at the visual interface of eye, oar, and water given the laws of light refraction. The error is not in the sensation but in the hasty judgment that therefore the oar is bent in fact. Correction comes not from

abandoning sensation but from more observation and better judgment: pick up the oar, look again, test the report against further experience. As Principal Doctrine 23 states: "If you fight against all your sensations, you will have no standard to which to refer, and thus no means of judging even those sensations which you claim are false."[4]

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## The Faculty the Modern World Has Forgotten: Anticipations

Of the three natural criteria — sensation, anticipations, and feelings — the least discussed in modern treatments of Epicurus is the second: the faculty he called *prolepsis*, translated into Latin as *anticipationes* and into English most naturally as "anticipations."

Anticipations are the generalized pre-concepts and pattern-recognitions that the mind builds from repeated sensory experience. When you have encountered horses many times, your mind has assembled those experiences into a recognizable pattern — a "preconception" of what a horse is — that allows you to recognize a new horse immediately without having to process each feature from scratch. This is not a rational construction or a definition arrived at through dialectical method. It is an automatic, empirically grounded recognition built by nature through the accumulation of experience.

Epicurus insisted that this faculty is built into every normal human mind from birth. It does not require philosophical training or the study of geometry. The ploughman who has observed horses his whole life has anticipations of horses just as reliable as the philosopher's. Diogenes Laertius records explicitly that Epicurean *prolēpseis* are formed entirely from repeated sensation — they are empirically grounded at every level (X.33).[5] This is the precise point at which Epicurus separates himself from Plato: Plato grounded certain concepts in the soul's pre-birth encounter with eternal Forms, making a priori knowledge possible. Epicurus grounded all concepts in accumulated sensory experience, making knowledge something available to every human being rather than reserved for the philosophically initiated.

The faculty of anticipations is exactly what is at work when we navigate the problem of AI-generated media in practice. We are not helpless in the face of convincing synthetic content because we do not rely only on the sensation of the moment. We rely on accumulated experience — the patterns we have assembled from thousands of real encounters, conversations, and observations — to evaluate whether what we are being presented with coheres with the larger fabric of our experience. The synthetic video that shows a political figure saying something they have never said is detectable — sometimes immediately, sometimes only on reflection — not because the pixels carry their own certification of falsity but because the claim embedded in the video conflicts with the accumulated anticipations we have built from real experience with that person, with the surrounding context, and with the natural world.



## Where Error Actually Lives

The most practically important insight in the Epicurean Canon for navigating an AI world is this: **error does not live in the sensations. It lives in the opinions the mind adds to the sensations.**

This sounds simple but its implications are radical. The Academic and Pyrrhonist Skeptics concluded from the possibility of deception that sensations cannot be trusted. Epicurus's response was that they had identified the wrong culprit. The sensation of the AI-generated video is real — your eyes and ears are accurately reporting the pixels and sound waves that reached them. The sensation itself did not deceive you. What deceives you — if deception occurs — is the hasty opinion that the sensation constitutes adequate evidence for the conclusion "this video is real and accurately represents an actual event."

The Epicurean Canon tells us that the correction for this error is not to distrust sensation but to be more careful about what the mind adds to sensation's report. Does the content of this video cohere with what your accumulated anticipations tell you about this person, this situation, this context? Does it survive scrutiny when tested against multiple independent observations? Should the feelings it produces — the unease, the implausibility, the sense that something doesn't fit

— be taken seriously as genuine signals rather than suppressed by the excitement of a striking claim?

Principal Doctrine 24 gives the basic methodological principle: "If you reject absolutely any sensation and do not distinguish between the opinion about what awaits confirmation and what is already given by sensation, by the feelings, and by the mind's observations, you will throw the remaining sensations into confusion with your foolish opinion, and thus destroy every standard for evaluating things."[6]

The point could not be more directly applicable. In an AI world, abandoning sensation entirely — concluding that nothing can be known from experience — is not epistemological sophistication. It is exactly the error Epicurus identified in the ancient Skeptics. It destroys the standard by which anything could be evaluated at all.

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## The Standard That Has Never Changed

As we move deeper into a world where artificial intelligence can produce synthetic sensory experiences of rapidly increasing fidelity, the Epicurean perspective becomes more valuable rather than less. And the reason is precisely that its foundation is not in the fidelity of any particular medium — not in 35mm film, not in digital photography, not in certified blockchain records — but in the natural faculties that every living human being has possessed since before any of those technologies existed.

The standard of truth for Epicurus is not, has never been, and will never be resort to supernatural authority, ideal forms, Aristotelian essences, or any artificial philosophical construction. It is the continuous and repeated testing of actual experience through the sensations, the anticipations built from accumulated experience, and the feelings of pleasure and pain that nature has provided as the honest signal of how things are going.

Most of us are already unable to judge reliably by direct inspection whether a given video was recorded or generated. But we can also begin to recognize something that Epicurus would have found obvious: the medium through which an

experience is delivered is not the determinative question. What matters is whether the content of that experience coheres with the accumulated pattern of real encounters with the world. AI-generated media is, in the relevant sense, just as "real" as media recorded on any earlier technology — in that it presents genuine sensory inputs to our genuine sense organs. What it is not is necessarily a reliable report of actual events. The evaluation of that question belongs not to the sensation itself but to the anticipations and judgment of the mind.

This has always been the situation. The ancient forgery of a document, the false witness in a trial, the sophist's manipulation of language — these were the AI-generated media of their age. Epicurus's point was never that deception is impossible. His point was that the tools for detecting deception are natural, universal, and available to everyone — not reserved for the philosophical sage, not dependent on supernatural revelation, not requiring the mastery of dialectical logic. They are sensation, anticipation, and feeling, operating together and tested continuously against the ongoing reality that the universe provides.

No advance in artificial intelligence, and no number of data centers generating synthetic experience, can change the basic fact: reality is what actually happens. What we actually see, hear, taste, touch, and smell; what we actually feel in terms of pleasure and pain; and what we recognize as consistent with the patterns we have assembled from genuine experience over a lifetime — these remain the only honest standards available. The universe is eternal and infinite and operates by natural laws that no amount of elaborate fabrication can permanently override. Truth for human beings is what survives the continuous testing of actual experience in the world as it is.

Epicurus understood this in the third century BC. It was important then. It is more important now.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Twins, Eggs, and Duplicate Worlds - How Epicurus Deals With Identical Things

Suppose you see a man across the street and greet him as your friend Publius. It turns out to be Quintus, his identical twin. Were your eyes deceived? Did your senses lie to you? And if they could lie to you once, why should you trust them ever again?

This is one of the oldest problems in the theory of knowledge. In the ancient world it was fought out between the Stoics and the Academic skeptics, and Cicero preserves the battle in the second book of his *Academic Questions*. The Stoics lost that fight, and they lost it because of a mistake Epicurus never made.

The Epicurean answer has two parts. First, Epicurean physics holds that truly identical things can exist, and that across the infinite universe they exist in numbers beyond counting. Second, the existence of identical things does no damage at all to the Epicurean view that all sensations are true. To see why, we need to look first at what the Stoics needed, and why they could not get it.

## The Stoics Needed Every Thing To Be Unique

The founder of Stoicism, Zeno, held that knowledge rests on a special kind of impression, which the Stoics called "kataleptic," or "grasping." To qualify, an impression had to come from something that really exists, it had to match that thing exactly, and it had to be *of such a kind that it could not come from anything else*. That last condition was the heart of the theory. A true impression had to carry its own mark of truth, a stamp that no false impression could ever have.

This only works if no two things in the world are ever exactly alike. If two things could be truly identical, then an impression of one could not be told apart from an impression of the other, and the mark of truth would fail.

So the Stoics insisted that every single thing in nature has its own unique character. They meant this literally. Cicero reports their claim that "there is not a single hair or a single grain in every respect like another hair or grain" (*Academic Questions* 2.85).[1] Seneca tells us where this uniqueness was supposed to come from:

> "And among the other reasons for marvelling at the genius of the Divine Creator is, I believe, this, – that amid all this abundance there is no repetition; even seemingly similar things are, on comparison, unlike. God has created all the great number of leaves that we behold: each, however, is stamped with its special pattern." (Seneca, *Moral Letters* 113.16)[2]

The Stoic theory of knowledge therefore depended on a claim about the divine order of the world. Every thing is unique because the Creator made it so, and our ability to know anything depends on that uniqueness.

## The Skeptics Attacked That Weak Point

The Academic skeptics saw the weakness and went straight at it. They pointed to twins such as the famous Servilii brothers, whom strangers could not tell apart. They pointed to eggs, to bees, to a hundred impressions of the same seal ring in wax. Cicero adds the case of the sculptor Lysippus:

> "Tell me, could not Lysippus, using the same brass, the same composition of metals, the same atmosphere, water, and all other appliances, have made a hundred Alexanders exactly alike? How then could you distinguish between them?" (*Academic Questions* 2.85)[3]

They even turned atomist physics against the Stoics. Democritus taught that there are countless worlds, and that some of them are so perfectly alike that there is no difference between them at all, "and so also are men."[4] If there can be countless identical copies of Catulus in other worlds, the skeptics asked, why not a second Catulus in this one? (*Academic Questions* 2.55)[5]

The Stoic spokesman in Cicero's dialogue is Lucullus, presenting the views of Antiochus. He answers in the only way the Stoic theory allows. He rejects

Democritus outright: "you are bringing me to the arguments of Democritus, with whom I do not agree."[6] He repeats that "everything has its own separate property."[7] He argues that a mother can tell her twins apart, and that the poultry-keepers of Delos could tell which hen laid which egg. And he admits that where the wise man truly cannot tell two things apart, he must withhold judgment (*Academic Questions* 2.56-57).[8]

Then he makes the admission that shows how much is at stake. He will not give up the uniqueness of the true impression "one finger's breadth, as they say, lest I should throw everything into confusion" (*Academic Questions* 2.58).[9] For the Stoic, a single true duplicate would bring down the whole structure of knowledge.

Cicero's reply goes to the core of the matter. Even if the Stoics were right that no two things are exactly alike, "it has nothing in the world to do with the question whether the things which are seen do not differ at all in any part, or whether they cannot be distinguished from another even though they do differ" (*Academic Questions* 2.85).[10] A difference no one can see is no help to someone trying to judge what he sees.

On the terms the Stoics themselves had set, this reply is decisive. The Stoics had made the impression itself responsible for certifying its own truth. Once two impressions can look the same, that certificate is worthless.

## Epicurean Physics Requires Countless Duplicates

Epicurus started from different premises, and they lead to the opposite conclusion about duplicates.

The atoms come in a limited number of shapes. Epicurus says their shapes are "not quite infinite, but only incomprehensible in number," while "in each shape the atoms are quite infinite in number" (*Letter to Herodotus* 42).[11] Lucretius proves both points at length (*On The Nature of Things* 2.478-568).[12] The universe is unlimited in space and eternal in time, and "there are infinite worlds both like and unlike this world of ours" (*Letter to Herodotus* 45).[13]

Put a limited number of building blocks together with unlimited material and unlimited time, and every possible arrangement will turn up again somewhere—and in infinite numbers.

The reasoning is simple. A world, a man, or an egg is made of a limited number of atoms. With a limited number of atomic shapes, there is only a limited number of ways to arrange that many atoms, even if that number is far too large to count. But the supply of atoms has no limit, and neither does the number of worlds. An infinite number of worlds built from a limited set of possible arrangements cannot all be different. The same arrangements must come up again and again without end. Epicurus says that the atoms able to make a world "have not been used up either on one world or on a limited number of worlds, nor again on all the worlds which are alike" (*Letter to Herodotus* 45).[14] Note his words: there are worlds "which are alike."

Lucretius says the same thing directly:

> "This there is too that in the universe there is nothing single, nothing born unique and growing unique and alone, but it is always of some tribe, and there are many things in the same race. ... Wherefore you must confess in the same way that sky and earth and sun, moon, sea, and all else that exists, are not unique, but rather of number numberless." (*On The Nature of Things* 2.1077-1086)[15]

Our sky, our earth, and our sun are not one of a kind. They are "of number numberless."[16] Velleius, the Epicurean speaker in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, gives this principle its name. Epicurus called it *isonomia*, or "uniform distribution," and it means that "in the sum of things everything has its exact match and counterpart" (*On the Nature of the Gods* 1.50).[17]

He goes further still. He says that even the very atoms that make us up have probably been arranged exactly as they are now at some time in the endless past:

> "For when you look back over all the lapse of immeasurable time that now is gone, and think how manifold are the motions of matter, you could easily believe this too, that these same seeds, whereof we now are made, have often been placed in the same order as they are now." (*On The Nature of Things* 3.854-858)[18]

None of this means that duplicates are common in any one place. In ordinary experience they are rare. Lucretius himself observes that "you will not find that every grain is like its fellows" (2.371-372), and he uses that ordinary variety as evidence for the variety of atomic shapes.[19] On our own street, or in our own world, the chance of meeting a true duplicate is very small. But across the whole of an infinite and eternal universe, the total number of duplicates is not small at all. It is beyond counting. Duplicates are rare in any one place and innumerable in total.

The Epicureans did not dodge this conclusion. They were not looking for a unique mark in each thing. They had no reason to deny that identical things exist, and they did not deny it. The skeptics knew this. When Cicero mocks the atomist idea of a "countless host of men, of the same names and rank, and exploits, and talents, and appearances, and ages, arguing on the same subjects" in other worlds, he is describing the atomist position accurately (*Academic Questions* 2.125).[20]

So the Epicureans accepted what the Stoics feared most. Why did it not destroy their theory of knowledge?

## First Answer: An Identical Thing Is Not The Same Thing

The first reason is that identical in structure does not mean the same individual.

Lucretius makes this point in the passage just quoted. Right before saying that our atoms have probably been in their present order before, he says this:

> "Nor, if time should gather together our substance after our decease and bring it back again as it is now placed, if once more the light of life should be vouchsafed to us, yet, even were that done, it would not concern us at all, when once the remembrance of our former selves were snapped in twain." (*On The Nature of Things* 3.847-851)[21]

The point here is very strong. Even the *same* atoms in the *same* order would not be us, because the chain of memory and life has been broken. If that is true of the same atoms, it is even more true of a duplicate made from different atoms in another place or another world. What makes a thing the particular thing it is in-

cludes its own history, its own place, and its own continuous existence. A perfect copy of Publius standing across the street is still a different man.

This is why Epicurean physics can accept duplicates without any confusion about identity. Two things can be alike in every part and still be two things.

## Second Answer: Identical Sensations Are Still True Sensations

The second reason goes deeper, and it is the one that answers the skeptics.

Cicero lists the four premises the Academics used to prove that nothing can be known. The first was "that some perceptions are false."[22] Cicero then tells the Stoic Lucullus: "Epicurus does not admit the first, but you, with whom we are now arguing, admit that one too" (*Academic Questions* 2.83).[23]

That single sentence explains the whole outcome. The twins argument works only against someone who believes that a sensation can be false, and who therefore needs a mark to tell the true sensations from the false ones. The Stoics believed this. Epicurus did not.

For Epicurus, a sensation is a report of what actually reaches the sense organ. When you see Quintus across the street, the image that reaches your eyes really does come from a man who looks exactly like Publius. Your eyes report that accurately. There is nothing false in the sensation. The sensation never said "this is Publius." That statement came from your mind. It was an opinion added to the sensation.

Lucretius draws exactly this line when he discusses a moving shadow. The eyes report where there is light and where there is shade. But "whether it is the same shadow which was here, that now passes there," the eyes cannot say: "this the reasoning of the mind alone must needs determine, nor can the eyes know the nature of things. Do not then be prone to fasten on the eyes this fault in the mind" (*On The Nature of Things* 4.379-386).[24] Whether a thing is *the same* thing is a question for judgment. It is never a question the sensation claims to answer.

And judgment has its own test. Epicurus taught that an opinion must be held as "awaiting confirmation" until further evidence confirms it or contradicts it. He warned that if we confuse the opinion with the sensation itself, "you will con-

found all other sensations as well with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment" (*Principal Doctrine* 24).[25] Notice that Epicurus and Lucullus both fear the same thing, the confounding of everything. But they locate the danger in opposite places. Lucullus thought the danger came from admitting a single duplicate. Epicurus saw that it came from mixing up what the senses report with what the mind adds.

So the man who mistakes Quintus for Publius has made an error of opinion, not of sensation. He corrects it the ordinary way. He walks closer, hears the voice, asks a question, or learns that Publius is out of town. Further evidence either confirms the first opinion or contradicts it. The mother who can tell her twins apart, and the poultry-keeper who knows his eggs, are not reading a divine mark stamped into each impression. They are using experience to form better judgments. Epicurus has no quarrel with them.

## Why This Matters

The Stoics built their theory of knowledge on a guarantee they could not deliver. They needed every impression of a real thing to carry a unique stamp, and they needed the world to be built so that this stamp was always present. When the skeptics showed that two things can look the same, the Stoics had nowhere to retreat except to deny the plain facts about twins and statues, or to suspend judgment in exactly the cases where the skeptics had pressed them.

Epicurus never made that bet. He did not need the world to be made of unique things. He did not need a Creator to stamp every leaf with its own pattern. He needed only what nature actually provides: senses that report what reaches them, and a mind able to test its opinions against more evidence. Because he expected nothing more from the senses than they can give, the twins argument cannot touch him.

This is not a dusty dispute. Modern technology can now produce images and sounds that cannot be told apart from the real thing. Anyone who believes that knowledge depends on a self-certifying mark is in the same trap as the Stoics. The Epicurean is not. He knows that his senses report truly what reaches them, that sameness and identity are matters for judgment, and that judgment is settled by gathering more evidence.

The universe may contain twins, eggs, and even countless duplicate worlds. None of that makes knowledge impossible. It only means that a reasonable person must keep his opinions open to confirmation.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Part Five: Ethics

# Which Comes First — Pleasure or Truth? How Epicurus Built His Philosophy

There is a criticism of Epicurean philosophy that is so common it has almost become a reflex: that Epicurus simply decided he wanted to pursue pleasure, and then constructed an elaborate philosophical system to justify that preference. On this view, the physics and the canonics are window dressing — a theoretical apparatus invented after the fact to make a foregone conclusion look respectable. Epicurus wanted to eat well and avoid discomfort, so he wrote himself a philosophy that told him that was the right thing to do.

This criticism gets the order of discovery exactly backward. And understanding why it is backward is one of the keys to understanding what Epicurean philosophy actually is and why it holds together as a coherent system rather than as a rationalization.

Epicurus did not begin with pleasure. He began with a question: *what is the universe actually made of, and how does it actually work?*

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## The Young Epicurus and the Question That Started Everything

The ancient biographical tradition preserves an account of the young Epicurus in his first philosophical encounter — an encounter that is telling precisely because of where his questions immediately went.

Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus was introduced to philosophy as a boy, and that when his teachers reached the opening of Hesiod's *Theogony* — the ancient cosmological poem that begins with Chaos as the primordial reality from

which everything else emerged — the young Epicurus asked his teachers a simple question: where did Chaos come from? The teachers had no satisfying answer. Chaos, in the traditional account, simply was — a given, an unexplained starting point for the story of how the universe came to be ordered. For a student willing to push at the foundations, this was not an answer. It was the absence of an answer dressed up as one.

This is where Epicurus began. Not with the question of how to feel good. Not with a preference for pleasure over pain that he then sought to justify. But with the most fundamental question a mind can ask about the world it finds itself in: *what is this, really? Where did it come from? What are the rules by which it operates?*

The path from that question to Epicurean ethics is not a shortcut. It runs through a complete natural philosophy — through the argument that the universe is composed of atoms and void, that nothing comes from nothing and nothing goes to nothing, that the universe as a whole has always existed and will always exist, that no supernatural forces govern its operations. It runs through the Canonics — the careful account of how knowledge of any of this is possible at all, grounded in the three natural faculties that every living creature possesses from birth: sensation, the anticipations that accumulated experience builds, and the feelings of pleasure and pain. Only after all of that does Epicurus arrive at the ethics — and he arrives there not by choosing pleasure arbitrarily but by following the logic of what the natural world, honestly investigated, turns out to contain.

The logic runs like this: if the universe is natural rather than supernatural, then the standards by which we evaluate our lives must be found within nature rather than handed down from above. If there are no gods who reward virtue and punish vice in some future existence, then the only genuine standard for how to live is the one nature itself has provided — and what nature has provided, built into every living creature from birth, is exactly the feelings of pleasure and pain. These are not arbitrary preferences. They are nature's own instruments for guiding living creatures toward what is genuinely good for them and away from what genuinely harms them. Pleasure is the goal not because Epicurus decided he

liked it but because an honest investigation of what nature actually is and how living creatures are actually constituted leads there directly.

This point deserves to be pressed further, because it is sometimes assumed that Epicurus's rejection of the supernatural was itself a kind of prior commitment — an obstinate refusal to consider the possibility that the universe might be governed by divine powers who could reward and punish. But this assumption mistakes the order of inquiry. Epicurus did not begin by deciding to deny the gods and then look for evidence. He began by asking what the evidence shows. And the answer that evidence supports — that the universe operates by natural causes, that the gods do not intervene in human affairs, that death is the end of sensation and not the beginning of divine judgment — is the answer he accepted *because* the evidence supports it, not because he was ideologically committed to it in advance.

Consider what intellectual honesty would have required if the evidence had pointed the other way. If Epicurus's investigation of nature had led him to conclude that the universe was in fact governed by supernatural powers, that divine beings genuinely rewarded virtue and punished vice in a life after death, that propitiating those beings genuinely changed outcomes — then his commitment to following the truth wherever it leads would have required him to accept those conclusions and build his ethics accordingly. The man who staked his entire philosophical method on following the evidence had no philosophical license to reject evidence that went against his preferences. If the supernatural had been real and detectable, he would have had to say so. He did not say so because the investigation did not support it — not because he was determined to arrive at a naturalist conclusion regardless of what the evidence showed.

The honesty cuts in both directions. Epicurus followed the evidence to naturalism because that is where the evidence goes. And that honesty — the willingness to accept what honest investigation delivers, even when it conflicts with comfortable tradition — is exactly what makes his conclusions trustworthy. He earned the naturalist conclusion. He did not assume it.

Truth first. Pleasure is what truth, honestly pursued, turns out to deliver.

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## Clarity and Honesty as the Foundation

Epicurus's commitment to clarity and honesty is not a minor methodological note in his philosophy. It is close to the center of everything.

The Epicurean Canon — the account of how knowledge is possible — is built on the radical insistence that sensation is reliable, that it reports accurately what it reports, and that the errors which produce false belief occur not in sensation itself but in the judgments we layer on top of sensory experience. The correction for false belief is not more elaborate reasoning disconnected from experience. It is better observation, more careful attention to what sensation actually reports, and greater honesty in distinguishing what the senses tell us from what our opinions add to what the senses tell us.

This commitment to honesty is not merely theoretical. It has direct practical consequences. Lucretius, in *De Rerum Natura*, returns repeatedly to the theme that a clear and honest understanding of the universe's workings — of what things are actually made of, how they actually behave, what the real causes of natural phenomena are — is the prerequisite for a life free from the groundless fears that make most human beings miserable. The person who does not understand that lightning is a natural meteorological phenomenon will fear it as a divine sign. The person who does not understand that death is simply the end of sensation — not a punishment, not a transition to a place of suffering — will spend their life in dread of a horror that does not exist. The person who does not understand that the gods, if they exist, have no interest in human affairs will waste their life in propitiatory rituals aimed at beings who are not listening.

Every one of these fears rests on a false belief. And every false belief, left unchallenged, is a source of unnecessary pain. The connection between honesty about the nature of things and freedom from unnecessary pain is direct, systematic, and central to the Epicurean program. This is why the study of nature — physics, as Epicurus calls it — is not a philosophical luxury reserved for those with leisure and intellectual curiosity. It is a practical necessity for anyone who wants to live well. You cannot be free from fears you do not understand. You cannot

understand fears that rest on false beliefs about the nature of the world without first achieving honest clarity about what the world actually is.

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## We Do Not Need a Theory of Everything

One qualification in the Epicurean approach to natural philosophy often escapes modern readers — and Lucretius makes it explicit, repeatedly, throughout *De Rerum Natura*.

Epicurus does not demand certainty on every question about the nature of the universe before the practical philosophical project can proceed. He is not waiting for a theory of everything. What he requires — and what Lucretius insists on as well — is not exhaustive knowledge of every phenomenon but a *systematic framework of understanding* that is reliable enough to ground the practical conclusions that actually matter for living well.

When Lucretius discusses natural phenomena whose specific causes are unknown — the causes of thunder, the behavior of magnets, the nature of volcanic activity — he typically offers multiple possible explanations, notes that any of several mechanisms consistent with the general principles of atomic physics might be operating, and declines to insist on a single definitive answer. What matters is not which specific mechanism is operating in any particular case, but that the phenomenon has a natural explanation — that it falls within the domain of natural causation rather than requiring supernatural intervention as its explanation. Once that is established, the practical philosophical consequence follows: this phenomenon is not a message from the gods, not a sign of divine anger, not something to be managed through ritual and propitiation. It is part of the natural order, and can be faced without the groundless fear that supernatural explanations generate.

This is the right level of resolution for the philosophical project. Not a complete account of every physical phenomenon, but a framework solid enough to support the practical conclusions — about death, about the gods, about fortune and fate, about what genuine goods are and how they can be pursued — that actually govern how a life goes.

Epicurus states this methodological principle directly in the *Letter to Pythocles* — the letter preserved by Diogenes Laertius in which he addresses the study of celestial and atmospheric phenomena. What he says there is the clearest single statement of the "framework, not theory of everything" principle in his surviving writings:

> *"We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems... For things above us admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.*
>
> *For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble."*

The principle could not be stated more plainly: follow the lead of phenomena, not arbitrary assumptions. Multiple consistent explanations are acceptable when the phenomena admit of more than one. What is not acceptable is forcing a single impossible explanation — particularly the supernatural explanation that introduces divine intervention where the phenomena do not require it and the evidence does not support it. And the reason this matters is not abstract philosophical tidiness. It is that irrational belief and groundless imagining — exactly what supernatural explanations without evidential support amount to — have no place in a life aimed at genuine freedom from unnecessary trouble.

Lucretius makes the same point when he notes that the goal of his investigation is to allow us to see the world and our lives *confidently* — with the security that comes from understanding rather than the anxiety that comes from ignorance or false belief. Confidence, not omniscience. Understanding, not exhaustive explanation. A framework solid enough to navigate by, not a map so detailed it could never be completed.

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## When Pain Serves Pleasure: The Honest Calculation

The picture of Epicurean philosophy as a philosophy of pleasure can mislead if it suggests that every decision the Epicurean makes must maximize immediate comfort. It does not. The Epicurean calculus is explicit, from the *Letter to Menoeceus* onward, that the relationship between pleasure and pain is comparative and temporal — that the relevant question is not "does this produce pleasure right now" but "does this produce more pleasure than pain, across the full range of its consequences, over the course of a life."

This means that the Epicurean regularly and deliberately chooses pain in the service of pleasure. The patient who submits to surgery accepts real pain now in order to secure genuine health later. The student who works through difficult material accepts the real discomfort of intellectual effort in order to secure understanding that will enrich every subsequent engagement with the subject. The soldier who fights in a war of genuine necessity accepts danger and suffering because the alternative — the pain of living under conditions that the war, if successful, would have prevented — is genuinely worse. The person who disciplines themselves to avoid a tempting pleasure that would bring greater pain in its wake is not practicing Stoic self-denial. They are practicing Epicurean prudence — the same calculation, applied honestly, that tells them the pleasure is not worth the price.

Epicurus does not pretend this is always easy. Vatican Saying 23 says plainly: "Every pleasure is a good because it is naturally akin to us, but not every pleasure is to be chosen, just as every pain is an evil but not every pain is always to be avoided."[1] The point is not that pain is acceptable in the abstract. The point is that the calculation of genuine goods and genuine harms must be made honestly, with full attention to consequences — and that an honest calculation sometimes points toward accepting pain as the price of a greater pleasure or the avoidance of a greater pain.

This is exactly what nature itself models. The animal that accepts the discomfort of hunting is securing the pleasure of food. The plant that pushes through difficult soil is reaching toward the light it needs. Nature does not counsel comfort at

any cost. Nature counsels effective pursuit of genuine goods — and sometimes effective pursuit requires temporary discomfort.

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## Gratitude to Nature: Usener Fragment 469

There is a saying of Epicurus — preserved by Stobaeus and catalogued by Usener as Fragment 469 — that captures the relationship between honest understanding of the universe and genuine pleasure with a simplicity that makes almost everything else superfluous:

**"Thanks be to blessed Nature because she has made what is necessary easy to supply, and what is not easy unnecessary."**[2]

This sentence rewards attention. It is not the observation of a philosopher who has first decided that pleasure is what he wants and then arranged reality to look like it cooperates. It is the observation of a philosopher who has investigated reality honestly and found that it actually does cooperate — not with every desire, but with the desires that genuinely matter, the desires that correspond to genuine needs, the desires that nature itself has built into living creatures because satisfying them is genuinely good for those creatures.

What is genuinely necessary for a good life — food, shelter, warmth, friendship, understanding, freedom from groundless fear — these things are available. Not effortlessly, not without the work and judgment that prudence requires, but available. The cosmos has not been constructed as an obstacle course for human happiness. The natural goods are within reach.

What is genuinely difficult to acquire — unlimited wealth, absolute power, the permanent domination of fortune, invulnerability to loss and change — these things are not necessary. Nature, in making them difficult, has not deprived us of anything we actually need. The desire for them, when it arises, is not nature speaking about genuine needs. It is the empty desire that the Epicurean identifies and cuts — not because desire is dangerous but because *this specific desire*, for what is both genuinely difficult and genuinely unnecessary, generates pain without payoff.

The gratitude Epicurus recommends toward Nature is not the passive gratitude of a person who has made peace with limited circumstances. It is the gratitude of someone who has looked honestly at the structure of things and recognized that the structure is, in the relevant respects, genuinely good — that the world we live in is one in which genuine happiness is genuinely available, to anyone who approaches it with the honesty and prudence the Epicurean philosophy provides.

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## Truth and Pleasure Are Not in Conflict

The apparent tension between truth and pleasure — the fear that an honest investigation of the world might turn out to recommend against pleasure — dissolves once the Epicurean framework is properly understood.

Falsification does not serve pleasure. This needs to be stated plainly, because it is sometimes assumed that a philosophy of pleasure might at least occasionally counsel a comfortable fiction over an uncomfortable truth. Epicurus takes exactly the opposite position, and for reasons that are entirely consistent with the pleasure calculus itself.

False beliefs generate pain. Not always immediately — sometimes a false belief does provide temporary comfort, which is precisely why false beliefs persist. But the comfort purchased through falsification is always fragile, always dependent on the continued suppression of contrary evidence, always at risk of collapse when reality asserts itself in a form that cannot be ignored. The person who lives with a false picture of what they can expect from the world, from their relationships, from their own health or circumstances, will eventually encounter reality in a form that the false picture did not prepare them for — and the pain of that encounter will generally be greater than the accumulated discomfort of having faced the truth honestly from the beginning.

More fundamentally: the entire Epicurean framework for identifying genuine goods and genuine harms depends on accurate perception of what is actually there. The Canon — sensation, anticipation, feeling — is a set of truth-tracking instruments. They work by accurately reporting what is real. Distort the inputs, suppress the reports, falsify the picture — and the instruments are disabled. The

person who has willfully falsified their picture of their own situation cannot use the Epicurean method to navigate that situation, because the method depends on honest attention to what sensation and experience and genuine feeling actually report.

This is why the study of philosophy and of nature is not optional for the person who wants to live well. It is the ongoing work of keeping the instruments calibrated — of maintaining the honest clarity about what is real that makes good choices possible. You learn the truth not because truth is valuable in itself, as an abstraction disconnected from living, but because truth is the necessary condition for the practical project of pursuing genuine goods and avoiding genuine harms. Truth serves pleasure — not by providing it directly, but by making possible the clarity of judgment that allows genuine goods to be identified and pursued.

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## How This Changes the Picture of Epicurean Philosophy

The picture of Epicurus that emerges from this account is very different from the popular caricature in both of its forms.

He is not the hedonist who decided he liked pleasure and then wrote himself a philosophy to justify it. He is a philosopher who began with the most fundamental questions about the nature of the universe — questions serious enough that his teachers could not answer the first one he asked — and followed the answers honestly to their practical conclusions. Those conclusions, arrived at through genuine investigation rather than prior commitment, point to pleasure as the natural goal of life. The order of discovery is: investigate nature honestly → find that nature is material and non-supernatural → find that nature has provided living creatures with sensation and feeling as their instruments for identifying genuine goods → find that pleasure is what those instruments point toward → conclude that the life aimed at pleasure, guided by honest understanding, is the best life available.

He is also not the disguised Stoic who counsels acceptance, restraint, and the philosophical management of desire. The Epicurean project is not to reduce

pleasure to a minimum but to maximize it — intelligently, over a lifetime, with the full range of natural goods available to a human being in view. The dentist and the surgeon and the soldier are not performing philosophical self-denial. They are doing exactly what the Epicurean calculus recommends: accepting lesser pain now in order to secure greater pleasure later, because that is what honest assessment of the situation shows.

And he is not the philosopher of comfortable fiction who would rather feel good than see clearly. He is — perhaps above all else — a philosopher of honesty: honesty about the universe, honesty about human nature, honesty about what genuine goods are and how much they cost and what they actually deliver. The study of philosophy and nature is the ongoing project of maintaining that honesty. Not because truth has a special authority independent of human life, but because truth is the instrument by which the only authority that matters — the genuine pleasure and genuine pain that nature has built into us from birth — can be accurately read and wisely followed.

Gratitude to blessed Nature, then. Not for making everything easy. For making the important things available, and the unimportant things honestly recognizable for what they are. That combination, with reason applied to navigate it wisely, is enough. It was always enough.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Happiness (Eudaimonia)

## What Does Happiness Mean in Epicurean Philosophy?

The Greek word *eudaimonia* — conventionally translated as "happiness," "flourishing," or "the good life" — is the master term in Epicurean ethics for what every human being ultimately seeks. It names the goal toward which all Epicurean practice, philosophy, and friendship are directed.

Understanding *eudaimonia* correctly is essential because Epicurean philosophy makes a claim that sounds simple but is philosophically precise: *eudaimonia* is the happy life, and the happy life is a life of pleasure (*hēdonē*). These are not two different things. Pleasure is not a *means* to happiness, as if happiness were some further state located beyond pleasure. Pleasure *is* what happiness consists in, once its nature and limits are properly understood through Epicurean philosophy. As Epicurus states in the *Letter to Menoeceus* (§128): "Pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life."[1]

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## Happiness as a Property of a Whole Life

One of the most important contributions David Sedley makes in his 2017 essay "Epicurean versus Cyrenaic Happiness" is clarifying what kind of thing *eudaimonia* is. It is not a momentary state. It is not the feeling you have at any given instant. *Eudaimonia* is a property of a **complete life**, taken as a whole. Sedley states this directly: "*Eudaimonia*, happiness, is a property of a whole life, not of some portion of it."[2]

This matters enormously for understanding Epicurus. It is easy to misread him as an advocate of moment-to-moment pleasure-seeking, as if his ethics were simply "chase the next pleasure." The Cyrenaic school — founded on the teachings associated with Aristippus — came close to that position, and Epicurus developed his own philosophy in deliberate opposition to it. For the Cyrenaics, individual pleasure is the *telos* (end), and *eudaimonia* is merely the accumulated sum of individual pleasures, each enjoyed separately as it occurs. They held that pleasure is "unitemporal" — it can only be experienced at the moment of its occurrence. On this view, happiness has no value beyond the individual episodes that compose it.

Epicurus rejected this position fundamentally. For Epicurus, *eudaimonia* is achievable because the **mind** has the capacity to enjoy one's entire life from any temporal vantage point. The memory of past pleasures, and the confident anticipation of pleasures still to come — including, above all, confidence in a serene and fearless death — allow a person to enjoy their life as a structured, complete whole. Sedley describes this as the distinctively Epicurean answer to the hedonist's problem: "For Epicurus, it [happiness as a whole-life property] is made possible by the mind's capacity to enjoy one's whole life from any temporal viewpoint: to relive past pleasures and enjoy future ones in anticipation, importantly including confidence in a serene closure."[3]

This is why Epicurus opens the *Letter to Menoeceus* not with a discussion of pleasure, but with a discussion of *eudaimonia* — and why he insists that it is available at every stage of life.

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## The Correct Definition of Happiness in Epicurean Terms

Epicurean *happiness* is best understood through three interconnected claims:

**First:** *Happiness* is the proper name for the goal of life — what every human being is really seeking, whether they know it or not. In this, Epicurus agrees with Aristotle and with the general Greek philosophical tradition. Happiness is not in dispute as the goal; what is disputed is what it consists in.

**Second:** *Happiness* consists in pleasure — specifically, in the removal of bodily pain (*aponia*) and the liberation of the mind from fear and anxiety. But these are not two separate goals placed alongside each other. They are both descriptions of a single pleasurable condition. The person who is free from pain and free from fear is the person who is living happily.

**Third:** *Happiness* is a property of a complete life, not of any moment taken in isolation. This means that happiness is something to be built, maintained, and enjoyed across time — through the accumulation of genuine memories, through philosophical practice, through friendship, and through the cultivation of the disposition that faces death without fear. Whoever possesses this disposition, Epicurus argues in Principal Doctrine 21, already possesses the conditions for a complete life, regardless of when death comes.[4]

The famous deathbed letter of Epicurus to Idomeneus illustrates all three of these points at once. Writing in physical agony from kidney disease and dysentery, Epicurus describes that final day as "the blessed day which is my life" — not this particular day, but the whole of his life, understood as a single day with its own proper conclusion. The joy of that day, he says, arose from the memory of past philosophical conversations with friends. He was not claiming that the present moment was pleasant. He was claiming that his *life* — enjoyed whole, from the vantage point of its close — was happy.

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## Why Happiness Requires Philosophy

*Happiness* in the Epicurean sense is not accidentally acquired. It requires Epicurean philosophy specifically. This is because the obstacles to *happiness* are cognitive errors: false beliefs about the gods, about death, about what we truly need, and about the nature of pleasure itself. These false beliefs produce fear and desire of the wrong kinds, which block happiness. Philosophy removes those obstacles.

Sedley notes that Epicurus "insists that it is Epicurean philosophy alone that can deliver happiness" — not because Epicurus was promoting a sectarian brand, but because only a philosophy that correctly identifies what pleasure is, what we genuinely need, and what death actually is can free a person from the fears and

compulsive desires that prevent happiness.[5] The study of nature (*physiologia*) is not an academic exercise for Epicurus; it is medicine for the soul, and its outcome is *eudaimonia*.

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## Primary Texts: Key Passages Using *Eudaimonia* Explicitly

What follows are the key passages from the primary sources in which the word *eudaimonia* (or its verbal form *eudaimonein*, meaning "to be happy" or "to flourish") appears explicitly.

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### Letter to Menoeceus §122 (Diogenes Laertius 10.122)

This is the opening paragraph of the letter — the primary Epicurean locus for *eudaimonia* — and it contains the word twice. The translation below follows Sedley's rendering closely:

> Let no one either delay philosophizing when young, or weary of philosophizing when old. For no one is under-age or over-age for health of the soul. To say either that the time is not yet ripe for philosophizing, or that the time for philosophizing has gone by, is like saying that the time for happiness (*eudaimonia*) either has not arrived or is no more. So both young and old must philosophize — someone young so that as he ages he can be made young by his goods, through his thankfulness for things past, someone old so that he can be at once young and aged, through his fearlessness towards things future. Therefore we must rehearse the things which produce happiness (*eudaimonian*), seeing that when happiness is present we have everything, while when it is absent the one aim of our actions is to have it.

Note the structure of the argument. Philosophizing at any age is justified precisely because *eudaimonia* is available at any age, from any temporal vantage point. The young person builds a treasury of past goods to remember gratefully; the old person secures fearlessness toward what lies ahead. The whole of life, from either end, can be the site of *eudaimonia*.

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**Letter to Pythocles §116 (Diogenes Laertius 10.116)**

This passage, from the letter dealing primarily with celestial phenomena, contains a definition of the divine nature in terms of *eudaimonia* that serves as the model for human happiness:

> God is a living being who possesses complete happiness (*pantele eudaimonian kektemenon*) and immortality, having no trouble himself and causing none to any other, so that he is not affected by anger or favor — for all such things exist only in the weak.

This definition is philosophically significant. The divine nature possesses *complete* (*pantele*) *eudaimonia* — Epicurus's own technical term for a happiness that lacks nothing and requires nothing beyond itself. This is the positive model against which Epicurean human happiness is measured: not an unreachable divine perfection, but the very condition that Epicurean philosophy makes available to any human being who correctly understands nature and their own needs.

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**Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 32 (Smith edition), Column II–III**

Diogenes of Oinoanda (2nd century AD) erected a large philosophical inscription in Lycia for the benefit of passersby, to communicate the Epicurean path to happiness. In Fragment 32, at the opening of his ethical argument, he announces his subject explicitly using the verbal form of *eudaimonia*:

> [Our subject is] what happiness (*to eudaimonein*) is and what is the ultimate object that our nature desires — and it is answered by identifying pleasure as the *telos*.

*(Text from Smith's 1993 critical edition, Fr. 32 II.3–III.1; translation following Sedley's rendering in his footnote 1. For the full reconstructed column text, Smith's edition is required.)*

The significance of this passage is that Diogenes — writing several centuries after Epicurus — frames his entire ethical inscription around *eudaimonia* as the master question, and immediately identifies pleasure as the answer. This confirms

that the identification of *eudaimonia* with pleasure was maintained as the central Epicurean commitment throughout the history of the school.

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### Philodemus of Gadara, *On Death* (*De morte*), Col. 38.14–19 (PHerc. 1050)

Philodemus (c. 110–40 BC) is the Epicurean philosopher whose works survive in the carbonized papyri from Herculaneum. In *On Death*, he writes:

> Someone with good sense, once he has attained the whole of what suffices for a happy life (*pros eudaimona bion*), from that point on walks around as one laid out for burial, and reaps the benefit of that single day as if it were an eternity.

*(Text from Henry's 2009 critical edition; cited and translated in Sedley's 2017 essay, footnote 32.)*

This is a remarkable passage. The phrase "what suffices for a happy life" (*pros eudaimona bion*) refers to the Epicurean conditions for happiness: the removal of pain, the freedom from fear, and the pleasures — above all the kinetic pleasures of friendship and philosophical conversation — that give a life its texture and variety. Once a person has attained these conditions, Philodemus argues, even a single additional day of life has infinite value, because it is lived as an already-complete life. This directly echoes Epicurus's own argument in Principal Doctrine 19 that "infinite time and finite time have equal pleasure, if one measures its limits by reasoning."[6]

The passage also contains an important philosophical implication: *eudaimonia* is not something accumulated indefinitely over an ever-longer life. It is something *achieved* — and once achieved, every subsequent day is lived as the fullness of a complete life, not as an installment toward some future goal.

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### Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book 10 — The Wise Man

Diogenes Laertius does not use the word *eudaimonia* in his own account of Epicurus's life (X.1–28).[7] It appears in his summary of the Epicurean wise man, just before the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

> "And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy." (X.118)[8]

> "They say also that there are two ideas of happiness, complete happiness, such as belongs to a god, which admits of no increase, and the happiness which is concerned with the addition and subtraction of pleasures." (X.121)[9]

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## Summary

*Eudaimonia* in Epicurean philosophy is not a vague synonym for feeling good. It is a precise philosophical concept: the condition of a person whose life, taken as a complete whole, is characterized by pleasure — by freedom from bodily pain and from mental fear, and by the active enjoyment of genuine goods, above all friendship and philosophical understanding. It is available at any age. It requires no extraordinary fortune. And it is delivered, Epicurus insists, by philosophy alone — the philosophy that teaches us what we genuinely need, what we have nothing to fear, and how to enjoy the life we already have.

The passages quoted above — from Epicurus himself, from Philodemus, and from Diogenes of Oinoanda — show that this commitment to *eudaimonia* as the explicit goal, defined as pleasurable life, was consistent across the entire history of the Epicurean school.

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*Primary sources: Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus (DL 10.122); Letter to Pythocles (DL 10.116); Philodemus, De morte 38.14–19 (Henry ed., 2009); Diogenes of Oinoanda Fr. 32 (Smith ed., 1993).*[10] *Secondary source: David Sedley, "Epicurean*

*versus Cyrenaic Happiness," in Seaford, Wilkins, and Wright (eds.), Selfhood and the Soul (Oxford, 2017), pp. 89–106.*

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## Appendix: References to Eudaimonia in Epicurean Literature and Testimonia

What follows is a preliminary list of passages where *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία) or a directly related concept appears in Epicurean literature and testimonia. Because Latin Epicurean texts use equivalent terms (*beata vita*, *felicitas*, *beatum*) rather than the Greek word itself, and because Epicurus himself sometimes uses the near-synonym *μακάριος* (blessed) where context makes *eudaimonia* the clear intended referent, both explicit and conceptually equivalent occurrences are noted, with the distinction maintained throughout.

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### 1. Epicurus – Letters, Doctrines, and Sayings

***Letter to Menoeceus***

- Sections: §§122–132 (Diogenes Laertius 10 numbering)
- Greek: *εὐδαιμονία* appears explicitly and repeatedly.
- Key passages:
  - §122: Epicurus states that philosophy aims at the happy and blessed life (*εὐδαίμονα καὶ μακάριον βίον*).
  - §128: Pleasure is identified as the beginning and end of the *blessed life* (*μακαρίως ζῆν*).
  - §131–132: *Phronesis* (practical wisdom) is called greater than philosophy itself, because it is the source of all the virtues and of the happy life.
- This letter is the primary Epicurean locus for *eudaimonia* in direct philosophical argument.

***Letter to Herodotus***

- Sections: §§37–83 (DL 10 numbering)
- Language: Greek.
- Eudaimonia is not the letter's central theme (which is physics and epistemology), but the closing section (§§81–82) makes clear that correct natural philosophy removes the fears that obstruct happiness. The happiness rationale for doing physics is implied throughout.

***Letter to Pythocles***

- Sections: §§84–116 (DL 10 numbering)
- Language: Greek.
- Primarily meteorology and celestial phenomena. The connection to *eudaimonia* is indirect: liberation from superstitious dread of celestial events is a condition of the happy life. Explicit use of the term is minimal, but see §116 for the definition of divine *eudaimonia* as the positive model for human happiness (quoted in the main article above).

***Principal Doctrines (Κύριαι Δόξαι)***

References by DL 10 section numbers (the standard):

- **PD 1** (DL 10.139): The blessed (*μακάριον*) and immortal being has no troubles itself and causes none to others.[11] Though *eudaimonia* is not the word used, the *makarios* divine model of happiness is foundational.
- **PD 3** (DL 10.140): The limit of the magnitude of pleasures is the removal of all pain — directly defines the upper boundary of the happy life.[12]
- **PD 4** (DL 10.140): Pain does not continuously last in the body; extreme pain is brief, moderate pain does not overtop bodily pleasure — key to understanding achievable happiness.[13]
- **PD 5** (DL 10.140): "It is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly, and impossible to live prudently, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly." — The conjunction of virtue and pleasure as conditions of the happy life.[14]
- **PD 17** (DL 10.144): The just man is the least troubled; the unjust, most troubled — happiness and justice linked.[15]

- **PD 19** (DL 10.145): Infinite time and finite time contain equal pleasure if the limits of pleasure are measured by reason.[16]
- **PD 27** (DL 10.148): Wisdom produces friendship as the greatest of the goods contributing to the happy life (*εὐδαίμονα βίον* in some manuscript traditions).[17]

Note: *εὐδαιμονία* appears explicitly in some manuscript traditions of the Doctrines and in ancient scholia; in others, the *makarios/makariotēs* vocabulary predominates. The two terms function as virtual synonyms in Epicurean usage.

***Vatican Sayings (Sententiae Vaticanae)***

The Vatican manuscript (Codex Vaticanus Graecus 1950) preserves these sayings. Saying numbers follow the standard edition (Usener; revised by Arrighetti). Sayings using *εὐδαιμονία* explicitly or treating the happy life as their direct subject:

- **VS 14**: Treats time as the horizon within which we must secure happiness; some editors read a form of *εὐδαιμονεῖν* in the Greek.[18]
- **VS 25**: The poverty of one governed by nature is great wealth; but the wealth demanded by empty opinion is infinite poverty.[19]
- **VS 27**: "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness (*μακαριώτατον*) of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship." — Uses *makarios* vocabulary rather than *eudaimonia* directly, but the argument is identical.[20]
- **VS 33**: Treats the voice of the flesh and the limits of pleasure and pain.[21]
- **VS 41**: Philosophical practice, laughter, and household management are to be pursued simultaneously without ceasing to proclaim true philosophy — the integration of life and doctrine as the condition of happiness.[22]
- **VS 44**: The wise man, when he has accommodated himself to necessities, understands better how to give than to receive — conditions of the happy life through self-sufficiency.[23]
- **VS 45**: The study of nature (*physiologia*) does not make men boastful but self-sufficient and proud of their own goods, not those of circumstance.[24]
- **VS 52**: "Friendship dances around the world bidding us all to rouse ourselves to give thanks." — Friendship as a constituent of the happy life.[25]

- **VS 63**: A limit exists in simple living; failure to observe it is as bad as extravagance.[26]
- **VS 77** (sometimes numbered 78): "The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom." — Autarkeia as a direct component of *eudaimonia*.[27]

***Usener Fragments (Epicurea, 1887)***

Usener's collection of fragments not included in the three letters or the canonical doctrines. Several explicitly treat *eudaimonia*:

- **Usener fr. 67–68**: On the self-sufficiency of the wise man and his happiness independent of external fortune.
- **Usener fr. 507**: Explicit use of *εὐδαιμονία* in discussing the relation between pleasure and the happy life.
- **Usener fr. 548**: On the nature of the highest good; connects *hēdonē* (pleasure) and *eudaimonia* directly.
- **Usener fr. 221** (= Porphyry, *To Marcella* 31): Epicurus connects the god's *makarios* nature with the model for human happiness.

References are by Usener fragment number; cross-references to the transmitting source (Athenaeus, Porphyry, Stobaeus, etc.) are essential for textual access.

***Lost Works with Evident Eudaimonia Content***

Diogenes Laertius (10.27–28) preserves a list of Epicurus's works. Among those whose titles indicate direct treatment of the happy life:

- **On the Goal** (*Περὶ τέλους*): A work specifically on the *telos*, which in Epicurean terms is the happy life (*eudaimonia*). Fragments survive through secondary sources.
- **On Lives** (*Περὶ βίων*): Discussion of ways of life and which achieve happiness.
- **On Choices and Avoidances** (*Περὶ αἱρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν*): Directly relevant to the calculus of pleasure and pain as the basis of happiness.

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### 2. Diogenes Laertius – *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book 10

Diogenes Laertius (3rd century AD) is the primary transmitter of Epicurus's three letters and the Principal Doctrines, but his own framing of Epicurus's philosophy also uses *eudaimonia* terminology.

- **Book 10, §§1–16**: DL's opening biographical and doctrinal summary of Epicurus uses *eudaimonia* and *makarios* vocabulary in characterizing the Epicurean philosophy.
- **Book 10, §§119–135**: Contains the **Letter to Menoeceus** (primary locus of *eudaimonia*).
- **Book 10, §§136–154**: Contains the **Principal Doctrines** with the *makarios/eudaimonia* passages noted above.

Standard references: DL 10.122–132 (Menoeceus); DL 10.139–154 (Doctrines). Editions: Long (OCT); Hicks (Loeb).

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### 3. Metrodorus of Lampsacus

Metrodorus (330–277 BC) was Epicurus's closest associate and co-founder of the school. His fragments, collected by Körte (1890) and partially reconstructed, include explicit treatments of *eudaimonia*:

- **On Wealth** (*Περὶ πλούτου*): Argues that wealth is not a condition of *eudaimonia*; happiness depends on pleasure, not property.
- **On Pleasure** (*Περὶ ἡδονῆς*): Directly connects bodily pleasure and *eudaimonia*.
- **Fragment preserved in Plutarch**, *Non posse suaviter vivi* 1089d–e: Metrodorus explicitly connects the happy life with the goods of the body as its necessary foundation — a passage important for understanding the Epicurean position.

References are to Körte fragment numbers (e.g., Körte fr. 14, fr. 21) or to the transmitting source.

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**4. Lucretius – *De Rerum Natura***

- Language: Latin (no direct use of *eudaimonia*)
- Latin equivalents used: *beata vita* (blessed/happy life), *felicitas*, *iucunde* (pleasantly)
- Lucretius's entire project is predicated on Epicurean *eudaimonia*: the poem aims to liberate readers from the fears (of death, the gods, and pain) that block the happy life.

Relevant passages by book and line:

- **Book 1, lines 62–79**: Epicurus praised as the first man to confront superstition and liberate humanity — the foundation of his gift of happiness to the human race.
- **Book 2, lines 1–61**: The famous proem (*Suave, mari magno...*), illustrating tranquility of mind as the goal of life. The pure and calm life (*vitam puram*) is the Lucretian equivalent of *eudaimonia*.
- **Book 3, lines 1–30**: Praise of Epicurus as discoverer of the way to the *beata vita*; Lucretius addresses Epicurus directly as the one who gave us the principles of a good life.
- **Book 3, lines 830–1094**: The extended argument against fear of death — the removal of which is the primary condition of happiness in Epicurean ethics. Climaxes with Epicurus's own words paraphrased.
- **Book 5, lines 1–54**: Second extended praise of Epicurus as a god (*deus ille fuit*) for founding philosophy and teaching the path to the happy life.
- **Book 5, lines 1117–1240**: Critique of political ambition, the striving for power, and competition — all of which obstruct happiness. The passage argues that simplicity (*vita simplex*) and nature's true limits are sufficient for a happy life.
- **Book 6, lines 1–42**: The proem crediting Athens and Epicurus with the gift of philosophy and a happy life (*vitam suavem*). Lucretius describes Epicurus as discovering not only the art of life but its crown — the *beata vita*.

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### 5. Philodemus of Gadara

Philodemus (c. 110–40 BC) was a major Epicurean philosopher whose works survive in carbonized papyri from Herculaneum (Herculaneum Papyri, PHerc.). Because these are papyrological texts, references use column (col.) and fragment numbers rather than continuous line numbers.

- **On Ends** (*Περὶ τελῶν*, PHerc. 1251, 1005, and others): Explicit use of *εὐδαιμονία* in defining the *telos* as pleasure. The work directly defends the Epicurean identification of the happy life with pleasure against rival schools.
- **On Choices and Avoidances** (*Περὶ αἱρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν*, PHerc. 1251): Treats *eudaimonia* in the context of the practical calculus of pleasure and pain.
- **On Death** (*Περὶ θανάτου*, PHerc. 1050): Contains the explicit *eudaimona bion* passage quoted in the main article above (Col. 38.14–19). Also Col. 36.29 treats the blessedness of the life of the person who has attained Epicurean goods.
- **On Frank Criticism** (*Περὶ παρρησίας*, PHerc. 1471): The practice of frank speech (*parrēsia*) in the philosophical community is treated as a condition of genuine friendship and hence of *eudaimonia*. The term or its equivalent appears in surviving columns.
- **On Anger** (*Περὶ ὀργῆς*, PHerc. 182): Treats anger as an obstacle to the happy life; *eudaimonia* or the happy/blessed life appears in the surviving columns.
- **On Vices and Virtues** (*Περὶ κακιῶν*, PHerc. 1008 and others): Vice is discussed as the negation of the good life; happiness as the positive standard.
- **On Wealth** (*Περὶ οἰκονομίας* / On Household Management, PHerc. 1424): Discusses the conditions — especially wealth's limited role — in a happy Epicurean life.
- **On Music** (*Περὶ μουσικῆς*, Book 4, PHerc. 1497/1583): The ethical evaluation of music as contributing to or detracting from happiness; *eudaimonia* terminology in surviving sections.

- **On the Good King According to Homer** (*Περὶ τοῦ καθ' Ὅμηρον ἀγαθοῦ βασιλέως*, PHerc. 1507): The happy life of the good ruler treated through Homeric examples.

Critical editions: Olivieri (1914); Indelli-Tsouna (1995); Tsouna (2007); Henry (2009); various *Cronache Ercolanesi* articles.

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### 6. Diogenes of Oinoanda

Diogenes of Oinoanda (2nd century AD) commissioned a large Epicurean inscription on a stoa wall in Lycia. Fragments survive and are numbered by Martin Ferguson Smith's standard critical edition (1993; 2003 supplement). The fragments relevant to *eudaimonia* include:

- **Fragment 3 (Smith)**: The ethical proem to the inscription, explaining that Diogenes erected it for the benefit of future generations; the goal of helping humanity achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the stated motivation.
- **Fragment 25 (Smith)**: Explicit discussion of *eudaimonia* and its basis in pleasure.
- **Fragment 28 (Smith)**: On the relation of pleasure to the happy life.
- **Fragments 32–36 (Smith)**: Definitions of the goal of life; pleasure as the foundation of happiness; discussions of false and true paths to *eudaimonia*. Fragment 32 is quoted in the main article above.

References: Fragment number + column (e.g., Fr. 3, col. II.1–10). Smith (1993) is the required reference for any precise citation.

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### 7. Cicero – Epicurean Speakers and Doxography

Though Cicero was personally hostile to Epicurean ethics, he is one of the most important transmitters of Epicurean philosophical arguments. In *De Finibus* and *De Natura Deorum*, Epicurean spokesmen present the philosophy in their own voice. The Latin equivalent of *eudaimonia* throughout is *beatum* / *beata vita* / *beatitudo*.

***(a) Torquatus – De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum, Book I***

- **Book I, §§17–54** (the full Epicurean positive presentation by Torquatus):
  - §§17–26: The method and defense of pleasure as the good.
  - §§29–42: The central argument identifying *beata vita* with pleasure — the Latin presentation of the *eudaimonia* = pleasure equation.
  - §§43–54: The role of virtue, friendship, and wisdom as *means* to the happy life (not ends in themselves).

***(b) Velleius – De Natura Deorum, Book I***

- **Book I, §§18–56**:
  - §§18–24: Velleius introduces Epicurean theology.
  - §§43–56: The blessed (*beata*) nature of the Epicurean gods — their happiness as the model for human *eudaimonia*, since the gods' complete pleasure, freedom from toil, and self-sufficiency define the ideal of the happy life.
- The Epicurean god functions as the positive exemplar (*paradeigma*) of *eudaimonia* in Epicurean theology.

***(c) Tusculan Disputations, Book 3***

- **Book 3 (On Grief, *De Aegritudine Pellanda*)**: Cicero reports and engages with Epicurean arguments on emotional distress as an obstruction to happiness. §§41–47 present Epicurean positions on the management of distress as a condition of *beata vita*.

***(d) Tusculan Disputations, Book 5***

- **Book 5, §§87–96**: Directly debates whether virtue alone suffices for the happy life — Cicero presents the Epicurean position that pleasure (not virtue alone) is necessary and sufficient. Key locus for the Epicurean *beata vita* argument in Latin.

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## 8. Other Epicurean Testimonia

### *Porphyry – To Marcella (Ad Marcellam)*

Porphyry (3rd century AD), though a Neoplatonist, quotes Epicurus extensively in this letter. The Epicurean quotations relevant to *eudaimonia* include:

- **Sections 27–31**: Quotations from Epicurus on the conditions of happiness; the famous "four remedies" (*tetrapharmakos*) framework is related here; the happy life's conditions are stated in Epicurean terms.
- **Section 31** (= Usener fr. 221): The model of divine happiness (*makarios*) as attainable by the wise human.

### *Athenaeus – Deipnosophistae*

Athenaeus (2nd–3rd century AD) quotes Epicurus on pleasure and the happy life in several places:

- **Book 7, 278c–d**: Quotes Epicurus connecting pleasure and *eudaimonia*.
- **Book 12, 546d–547a**: Extended quotation from Epicurus on pleasure as the beginning and end of the happy life — one of the most explicit sources outside DL. Greek *εὐδαιμονία* likely appears in the original Epicurean text quoted.

### *Sextus Empiricus – Against the Ethicists (Adversus Mathematicos XI)*

- **Sections XI.63–67**: Reports Epicurean ethical doctrine, using *εὐδαιμονία* in summarizing the Epicurean position that pleasure is the criterion of the good life.
- **Sections XI.96–109**: Additional doxographical report of Epicurean ethics, relevant to the *telos* argument.

### *Plutarch*

Plutarch (1st–2nd century AD) is polemically anti-Epicurean but quotes Epicurean texts extensively:

- ***Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*** (*That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible*; Moralia 1086c–1107c): The primary Plut-

archan polemic. Contains numerous quotations of Epicurean texts, including explicit uses of *eudaimonia* from Epicurus and Metrodorus. Key sections:

- 1088d–1089f: Metrodorus and Epicurus on the bodily basis of happiness.
- 1091a–c: Epicurean pleasure as the substance of *eudaimonia*.
- 1098b–1099c: Friendship, memory, and the happy life.

- ***Adversus Colotem*** (*Against Colotes*; Moralia 1107c–1127e): The defense of other schools against the Epicurean Colotes. Contains Epicurean quotations using *eudaimonia* vocabulary in the course of reporting their positions.
- ***De Latenter Vivendo*** (*On Living in Obscurity*; Moralia 1128a–1130e): Short essay engaging the Epicurean *lathē biōsas* ("live unnoticed") maxim as a teaching about the happy life.

***Clement of Alexandria – Stromata (Miscellanies)***

Clement (2nd–3rd century AD) quotes Epicurus in ethical contexts:

- **Stromata Book 2, Chapter 21 (§§130–131)**: Quotes Epicurus directly on pleasure and *eudaimonia*, reporting the Epicurean doctrine that pleasure (*hēdonē*) is the beginning and end of the blessed life.
- **Stromata Book 6**: Additional quotations in the context of philosophical comparisons.

***Stobaeus – Anthology (Eclogae)***

John of Stobi (5th century AD) preserves numerous philosophical fragments, including Epicurean material:

- **Book 2, ch. 8 (Wachsmuth ed.)**: Doxographical report on Epicurean ethics; uses *eudaimonia* in summarizing the Epicurean *telos*.
- **Book 3, various sections**: Further Epicurean fragments on the happy life, including material from Metrodorus and Hermarchus.

### *Hermarchus*

Hermarchus of Mytilene (c. 325–250 BC) was Epicurus's successor as head of the school. Fragments preserved primarily in Porphyry's *On Abstinence*:

- **Porphyry, *De Abstinentia* I.7–12**: Fragments of Hermarchus on justice, self-preservation, and the happy life. *Eudaimonia* appears in the context of arguing that justice contributes to happiness.

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## Summary Table – Core Occurrences

| Author | Work | Section | Language | Term Used | Reference Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Epicurus | Letter to Menoeceus | DL 10.122–132 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* (explicit) | Continuous sections |
| Epicurus | Letter to Pythocles | DL 10.116 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* (explicit) | Section number |
| Epicurus | Principal Doctrines | DL 10.139–154 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* / *μακάριος* | Section numbers |
| Epicurus | Vatican Sayings | VS 14, 25, 27, 33, 41, 45, 52, 77 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* / *μακάριος* | Saying numbers |
| Epicurus | Usener Fragments | Usener fr. 67–68, 507, 548 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* (explicit) | Fragment numbers |
| Epicurus | On the Goal | (via Athenaeus, Stobaeus) | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Fragment + source |
| Metrodorus | On Wealth; On Pleasure | Körte frr. 14, 21 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Fragment numbers |
| Metrodorus | (via Plutarch) | *Non posse* 1089d–e | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Moralia section |
| Hermarchus | (via Porphyry) | *De Abs.* I.7–12 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Section numbers |
| | Lives, Book 10 | | Greek | | |

| Author | Work | Section | Language | Term Used | Reference Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Diogenes Laertius | | DL 10.1–16; 119–154 | | *εὐδαιμονία* / *μακάριος* | Section numbers |
| Lucretius | De Rerum Natura | 1.62–79; 2.1–61; 3.1–30; 3.830–1094; 5.1–54; 5.1117–1240; 6.1–42 | Latin | *beata vita*, *felicitas* | Line numbers |
| Philodemus | On Ends | PHerc. 1251, 1005 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* (explicit) | Column + fragment |
| Philodemus | On Death | PHerc. 1050, col. 38.14–19 | Greek | *εὐδαίμονα βίον* (explicit) | Column + line |
| Philodemus | On Anger | PHerc. 182 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Column + fragment |
| Philodemus | On Frank Criticism | PHerc. 1471 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Column + fragment |
| Philodemus | On Vices | PHerc. 1008 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Column + fragment |
| Diogenes of Oinoanda | Inscription | Fr. 3, 25, 28, 32–36 (Smith) | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* (explicit) | Fragment + column |
| Cicero / Torquatus | De Finibus I | §§17–54 | Latin | *beata vita*, *beatum* | Section numbers |
| Cicero / Velleius | De Natura Deorum I | §§18–56 | Latin | *beata vita*, *beatum* | Section numbers |
| Cicero | Tusculan Disputations III | §§41–47 | Latin | *beata vita* | Section numbers |
| Cicero | Tusculan Disputations V | §§87–96 | Latin | *beata vita* | Section numbers |
| Porphyry | To Marcella | §§27–31 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* / *μακάριος* | Section numbers |
| Athenaeus | Deipnosophistae | | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | |

| Author | Work | Section | Language | Term Used | Reference Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 7.278c–d; 12.546d–547a | | | Stephanus pagination |
| Sextus Empiricus | Adv. Math. XI | §§63–67; 96–109 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Section numbers |
| Plutarch | Non posse suaviter vivi | Moralia 1086c–1107c | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Moralia sections |
| Plutarch | Adversus Colotem | Moralia 1107c–1127e | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Moralia sections |
| Clement of Alexandria | Stromata | Book 2, §§130–131 | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Section numbers |
| Stobaeus | Anthology | Book 2, ch. 8 (Wachsmuth) | Greek | *εὐδαιμονία* | Edition section |

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Ataraxia Is Desirable But Not The Ultimate Goal

*"We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life. The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear."*[1] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

*"We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness, seeing that when that is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it."*[2] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

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## Introduction: The Single Worst Mistake in Reading Epicurus

There is a single mistake in the reading of Epicurean philosophy that, once made, distorts everything else. It is not a mistake about atoms, or about the gods, or about the classification of desires. It is a mistake about what Epicurus identified as the goal of life – the thing toward which all Epicurean philosophy is aimed and by which all Epicurean choices are to be measured. That mistake is the substitution of *ataraxia* – tranquility, or freedom from mental disturbance – for happiness and pleasure as the Epicurean goal.

Once this substitution is made, Epicurean philosophy transforms from a vigorous and life-affirming account of how to live as fully as possible into something that looks more like Stoic equanimity, Buddhist detachment, or quiet asceticism. The Epicurean wise man, instead of pursuing the richest and most fully pleas-

ured life that circumstances and wisdom allow, becomes a person whose primary aim is simply to be undisturbed – to minimize stimulation, reduce desire, and achieve the still water of a mind in which nothing much moves and nothing much is felt. The goal becomes a kind of spiritual calm that would not be out of place in any tradition of religious withdrawal.

This is not what Epicurus taught. It is not what the *Letter to Menoeceus* says. It is not what Torquatus describes in *On Ends*. It is not what Lucretius celebrates in *De Rerum Natura*. And it is not what the ancient Epicureans, who had access to all the texts and to living teachers of the philosophy, understood themselves to be pursuing. It is a modern – and in some respects ancient – misreading, produced by identifiable cultural filters that have operated on the reception of Epicurean philosophy for centuries and that still operate today.

This article names the mistake, identifies who makes it and why, returns to the primary text that most directly refutes it, and shows what the correct picture looks like once the substitution is reversed and happiness through pleasure is restored to its proper place at the center of the philosophy.

One terminological note before proceeding: the Greek word *ataraxia* will be used in this article because it appears so frequently in discussions of Epicurus – including in many that have done much to perpetuate the error being corrected here – that ignoring it would leave the reader without the tools to identify the mistake when they encounter it elsewhere. But the word will be used precisely: *ataraxia* means freedom from mental disturbance, or tranquility of mind. It is a real and important concept in Epicurean philosophy. The error is not in using the word. The error is in making what it names the goal of Epicurean life – the destination rather than a feature of the journey.

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## A Stone Inscription Against the Misreading: Diogenes of Oinoanda

Before turning to the primary texts, it is worth pausing on a piece of ancient evidence that should be placed as prominently as possible in any discussion of what the Epicurean goal actually was. It is not from Epicurus himself, and it is

not from Torquatus or Lucretius. It is carved in stone – literally – on the wall of a public colonnade in the ancient city of Oinoanda in what is now southern Turkey. Its author was a man named Diogenes, an Epicurean philosopher of the second century AD, who used his own money to have a monumental inscription created covering the entire wall of the stoa, so that anyone passing through the city – resident or visitor, literate citizen or traveler from abroad – could read a summary of Epicurean philosophy and benefit from it.

Diogenes was explicit about why he did this. He was old, near death, and he wanted to leave something for the generations to come. His statement of purpose in Fragment 3 of the inscription, in the Smith translation, is worth reading in full:

> *"Having already reached the sunset of my life (being almost on the verge of departure from the world on account of old age), I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a [fine] anthem [to celebrate the] fullness [of pleasure]..."*[3]
> – Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 3 (Smith translation)

An anthem to the fullness of pleasure. This is what Diogenes of Oinoanda wanted to carve into stone for all time. Not an anthem to tranquility. Not an anthem to the undisturbed mind. Not a celebration of minimal desire or philosophical quietism. An anthem to the fullness of pleasure – the full cup that the companion article on this site analyzes in detail, the life crammed with vivid pleasures that Torquatus describes, the active and engaged and richly pleasured existence that the authentic Epicurean tradition consistently celebrated.

Diogenes states the goal equally directly in Fragment 29, where he explains the purpose of the whole undertaking:

> *"...so that we may enjoy happiness through attainment of the goal craved by nature."*[4] – Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 29 (Smith translation)

Happiness through attainment of the goal craved by nature. Not tranquility. Not ataraxia as an end in itself. Happiness – the same word Epicurus used in the *Letter to Menoeceus* to describe what philosophy is for.

And in Fragment 32, Diogenes states the Epicurean position on pleasure versus virtue with a forcefulness that makes unmistakably clear what the school's authentic teaching was on exactly this point:

> *"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 inopportunely 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."*[5] – Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 32 (Smith translation)

Shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks. Pleasure is the end. The virtues are the means to the end, not the end themselves. This was carved in stone on a public wall in the second century AD, by an Epicurean who had access to more of the Epicurean tradition than we do and who was determined to make the authentic teaching as clear and as permanent as stone could make it.

The fragments of the Oinoanda inscription have been translated by M.F. Smith and are available online at https://www.english.enoanda.cat/the_inscription.html. Anyone who doubts the argument of this article should read Fragment 32 directly. No Epicurean who had absorbed that doctrine could honestly summarize the Epicurean goal as tranquility.

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## Part One: What the Letter to Menoeceus Actually Says

The *Letter to Menoeceus* is the primary Epicurean text on ethics and the good life. It is the letter in which Epicurus tells us, most directly and most systematically, what he is trying to achieve and why. It is the text that any reader who wants to understand Epicurean ethics should read first and return to most often. And it is the text that most directly and most clearly refutes the substitution of ataraxia for happiness and pleasure as the goal of life.

The letter opens by identifying the proper purpose of philosophical study: the health of the soul. Philosophy practiced correctly enables a person to live and die happily. From the outset, happiness is the stated destination. Not tranquility. Not freedom from disturbance as an end in itself. Happiness.

The letter then works through the Epicurean account of the gods, the nature of death, the structure of desires, and the nature of pleasure, building toward its most direct statement of the goal. That statement appears in a passage that is among the most important in all of Epicurean philosophy:

> *"For this reason we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."*[6] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

Pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life.[7] Not freedom from disturbance. Not tranquility. Pleasure. And immediately before this passage, Epicurus defines exactly what he means:

> *"When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind."*[8] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*[9]

Here – in this single sentence – is where the confusion originates and where it must be resolved. Epicurus is explaining that when he says pleasure is the end, he does not mean merely the vivid pleasures of external stimulation. He means pleasure in its full and proper extent: which includes freedom from bodily pain and freedom from mental trouble, because these are genuine pleasures – real experiences of what is good for a living creature – not merely the absence of bad things.

The confusion arises when this passage is misread as saying: "I don't mean pleasure; I mean freedom from disturbance." That is not what it says. It says: when I say pleasure, I mean the full range of genuine pleasurable experience, which includes the freedom from pain and disturbance that the Platonic and ordinary usage of "pleasure" might overlook. Freedom from mental trouble is pleasure. It is not the replacement of pleasure by something higher or more refined. It is pleasure itself, correctly understood.

The letter then provides the description of what this looks like in the life of the wise man:

> *"When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind. For it is not continu-*

> *ous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."*[10] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

Sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance. This is how pleasure is secured and sustained – not by abandoning it in favor of something called tranquility, but by using reason as the instrument for achieving the most genuine and most lasting pleasure possible. Reason serves pleasure. It does not replace it.

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## Part Two: The Structure of the Error – How Ataraxia Gets Promoted to the Top

### The Word and What It Actually Names

The word *ataraxia* – translated variously as tranquility, freedom from anxiety, freedom from mental disturbance, or serenity of mind – names a real and important feature of the Epicurean picture of the good life. The mind that has been freed from irrational fear about the gods, from terror of death, from anxious craving for things that exceed the natural and necessary, from the endless competitive striving after wealth and fame: this mind is in a state that Epicurus genuinely valued and that the ancient Epicurean writers genuinely celebrated.

But *ataraxia* is the name for what the mind is like when it is in a state of full pleasure – when the cup, as the companion article on The Full Cup Model develops, is full. It is the description of the pleasured mind from the negative side, just as the absence of bodily pain (*aponia*) is the description of the pleasured body from the negative side. It is not a separate goal that stands above pleasure. It is not a more refined or more philosophical version of pleasure that the wise person pursues instead of ordinary pleasure. It is pleasure itself, the pleasure of the mind in full possession of its good, described in terms of what it is free from rather than what it contains.

The companion article on The Norm Is Pleasure Too develops this point in detail through the analysis of Principal Doctrine 3 and the *Letter to Menoeceus*.[11] The core of the argument is simple: Epicurus held that there are only two internal states available to a living creature – pleasure and pain – and that the presence of one entails the absence of the other. A mind that is free from disturbance is therefore a mind in pleasure. Freedom from disturbance is not a third state above pleasure and pain; it is what pleasure of the mind looks like.

To say that the goal of Epicurean life is ataraxia – tranquility – while meaning something other than or above pleasure, is therefore to misread the entire framework. It is to introduce a third state that Epicurus explicitly denied, and to make that third state the destination while demoting pleasure to merely a means or a byproduct.

### Why the Promotion Happens: The Three Distorting Traditions

The promotion of ataraxia to the status of the Epicurean goal does not happen randomly. It happens for identifiable reasons, driven by identifiable cultural filters that have operated on the reading of Epicurus for centuries. These three push in the same direction on this question.

**The Stoic filter.** The Stoics held that the highest good is virtue – specifically, the rational life lived in conformity with the divine rational order. The Stoic ideal is the sage whose mind is entirely undisturbed by external circumstances, who is as happy in the midst of pain and misfortune as in comfort and prosperity because his inner rational order is unaffected by whatever happens outside. When Stoics encountered Epicurean philosophy, they had a strong interest in reading *ataraxia* – the undisturbed mind – as the Epicurean equivalent of their own ideal, because this made Epicurus a kind of imperfect Stoic: someone who had glimpsed the right goal but expressed it in the wrong language. The Stoic domestication of Epicurus by reading his goal as tranquility rather than pleasure was already well underway in antiquity. Cicero's persistent emphasis on *ataraxia* as the Epicurean standard, while he simultaneously attacks the very idea that pleasure is the highest good, is a version of this Stoic filter in operation.

**The religious filter.** For the Abrahamic traditions that came to dominate Western thought after Epicurus, pleasure as the goal of life is morally suspect – it

sounds like selfishness, indulgence, or the failure to subordinate one's natural desires to a higher divine purpose. The idea that tranquility – peace of soul, freedom from the storms of passion, the still water of a mind at rest – is what the good life amounts to is far more theologically comfortable. It can be assimilated to ideas of spiritual peace, of the soul at rest in God, of the virtuous person whose passions are properly ordered under reason. Reading Epicurus as a philosopher of tranquility rather than pleasure made him far less theologically threatening and far more easily domesticated into a broadly acceptable picture of the philosophical life. This domestication came at the cost of reading him correctly, but it was theologically convenient.

**The Humanist filter.** Modern Humanism carries within it a secularized version of the Platonic-Stoic ideal: the good person is defined by rational self-restraint, the subordination of appetite to principle, and the conformity of behavior to universal rational standards. The idea that the highest good is pleasure is uncomfortable for this framework because pleasure sounds too individual, too bodily, too variable to serve as a universal rational standard. The substitution of tranquility – a state that sounds more elevated, more rational, more universal – for pleasure makes Epicurus more comfortable for the Humanist reader. But again, the comfort is purchased at the cost of misreading what Epicurus actually said.

All three filters push the reading of Epicurus in the same direction: away from pleasure, which sounds too base, too individual, or too undignified, and toward tranquility, which can be made to sound elevated enough to fit within their respective frameworks. And all three produce the same result: an Epicurus who is no longer recognizably Epicurean.

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## Part Three: The Letter to Menoeceus States the Goal Explicitly

The misreading of *ataraxia* as the Epicurean goal is not a subtle mistake that requires extensive textual analysis to detect. It is directly contradicted by what the *Letter to Menoeceus* says, explicitly and repeatedly. The letter is worth working through on this specific question, because the evidence against the misreading is not hidden.

### Happiness Is Named First

The letter opens with the purpose of philosophy stated in terms of happiness:

> *"Let no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul. And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away."*[12] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

Philosophy is the path to happiness. The health of the soul is happiness. This is what philosophy is for. The word "tranquility" does not appear here. The word "happiness" does.

### Pleasure Is Identified as the First Good

Later in the letter, after the treatments of the gods, death, and the structure of desires, Epicurus makes his most explicit statement of the foundational role of pleasure:

> *"For this reason we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."*[13] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

"The beginning and end of the blessed life."[14] Beginning and end – first and last. Not ataraxia. Pleasure. And pleasure is "the first good innate in us" – not something derived from reason, not something discovered through philosophical argument, but the most basic and fundamental feature of what it is to be a living creature capable of feeling.[15] Pleasure is the standard. Not tranquility.

### Ataraxia Appears in Its Correct Position

The word *ataraxia* – or its Greek equivalent, freedom from disturbance – does appear in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, in exactly the position it should occupy: as one element within the life of pleasure, not as the goal that replaces pleasure. The passage that contains it has already been quoted above: Epicurus is defining what he means by "pleasure as the end" and explaining that it includes freedom from bodily pain and mental trouble. Freedom from mental trouble is *ataraxia*. And

it is identified here as one of the things that constitute the pleasurable life – one of the things that make the end pleasurable – not as the end itself that supersedes pleasure.

The structure of the argument is: pleasure is the end → the pleasurable life consists in freedom from bodily pain and freedom from mental disturbance → therefore freedom from mental disturbance is a constituent of the pleasurable life that is the end. *Ataraxia* is downstream from pleasure, not above it.

### The Final Description Is of Pleasure, Not Tranquility

The letter closes with a description of what the good life actually looks like:

> *"Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not like unto a mortal being."*[16] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

"You will live like a god among men."[17] The gods of Epicurean philosophy live in a state of perfect and undisturbed pleasure – not merely undisturbed, but genuinely and fully pleasured, experiencing friendship, intellectual engagement, and the complete realization of all the goods that human beings pursue in partial and imperfect form. To live like a god is to live in the fullest possible pleasure, not in the stillness of a mind that has simply stopped being troubled by anything.

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## Part Four: Torquatus – The Fullest Ancient Account of the Goal

If the *Letter to Menoeceus* provides the foundational text on the goal of Epicurean life, Torquatus's speech in Cicero's *On Ends* Book I provides the fullest ancient account of what that goal looks like when spelled out in philosophical detail. And Torquatus is entirely clear about what the goal is.

## The Wise Man's Life

Torquatus's description of the ideal Epicurean life, in *On Ends* I.62, is the passage that any reader who thinks the goal is mere tranquility must come to terms with:

> *"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."*[18] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book I

"Continually in a state of pleasure."[19] "More pleasures than pains at every moment." "Great pleasure" when he compares his life with the fool's. "More reasons for joy than for vexation."[20] This is not the language of someone describing a goal of minimal disturbance. It is the language of someone describing a life actively full of pleasure – pleasure from memory, from the appreciation of the present, from comparison, from anticipation, from the philosophical understanding that enables all of these.

The freedom from disturbance that the wise man enjoys – his indifference to death, his freedom from dread of the gods, his equanimity in the face of whatever comes – is not the goal that makes this life valuable. It is the condition that enables the pleasures to accumulate without constant interruption and diminishment. Ataraxia clears the ground. Pleasure fills it.

## The Imagination Test

Torquatus provides what might be called the imagination test for the Epicurean goal in *On Ends* I.42:

> *"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?"*[21] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book I

"Numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind."[22] This is the target. The undisturbedness – "undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain" – is the condition under which the pleasures are enjoyed, not the thing being enjoyed.[23] The pleasures are numerous. They are vivid. They include both body and mind. A life of mere tranquility – of a mind that is simply undisturbed but not actively filled with anything in particular – does not meet this description. Torquatus is describing a life crammed full of genuine pleasures, enjoyed in a state that is as free from pain and anxiety as wisdom and circumstances can make it. The full cup, not the empty one.

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## Part Five: Principal Doctrines 3 and 4 – The Limit Is Not the Goal

### The Source of a Specific Confusion

A significant part of the confusion about ataraxia as the Epicurean goal derives from a misreading of Principal Doctrines 3 and 4. These are among the most important and most frequently misread doctrines in the entire list, and understanding what they are actually doing is essential to correcting the mistake about the goal.

*Principal Doctrine 3* states:[24]

> *"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."*[25]

Read in isolation, this can seem to say: the goal is the removal of pain, and once pain is removed, pleasure is maximal and nothing further is needed. On this reading, the Epicurean life consists in achieving the pain-free state – ataraxia and aponia, freedom from mental disturbance and bodily pain – and resting there. The goal is the absence, and the absence is the achievement.

But PD 3 is not defining the Epicurean goal. It is answering a specific philosophical challenge: Plato's argument, developed in the *Philebus*, that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it has no natural limit and therefore can never be complete. Epicurus answers: pleasure does have a limit, and that limit is reached when all pain has been removed. At that point, pleasure is complete – it cannot be increased in magnitude because there is no remaining pain to displace.

This is an argument *about* pleasure's structure, not a replacement of pleasure with something else. PD 3 establishes that the pleasurable life is achievable and complete, against Plato's claim that it is always incomplete. PD 1 through 4 form a deliberate sequence answering the three most powerful ancient arguments used to argue against pleasure as the goal: divine punishment, fear of death, and the "no limit" challenge. PD 3 is the answer to the third challenge. It is not a redefinition of the goal.

*Principal Doctrine 4* makes the same point in a complementary way:[26]

> *"Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh."*[27]

Again, this is about the structure and limits of pain and pleasure, not a definition of the goal as the mere avoidance of pain. Together, PD 3 and 4 establish that both pleasure and pain are finite, manageable, and structured in ways that make the pleasurable life genuinely achievable. They do not say the goal is to do nothing more than remove pain.

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## Part Six: The Practical Consequences of Getting This Wrong

### The Passive Life vs. the Full Life

Getting the goal wrong – substituting ataraxia for pleasure and happiness – produces a picture of the ideal Epicurean life that is radically different from what the texts actually describe, and one that is worse, not better, than the life Epicurus was recommending.

The person who understands the goal as tranquility will naturally tend toward passivity: toward reducing stimulation, withdrawing from engagement, minimizing desire, and seeking a still and quiet life in which nothing much disturbs the undisturbed state they are trying to achieve. This is the picture of the Epicurean that has dominated much modern commentary: the Epicurean who retreats to the garden, cultivates minimal desires, avoids politics and public life, and achieves a kind of philosophical quietism that looks, from the outside, remarkably like Buddhist detachment or Stoic apathy.

But Torquatus's imagination test asks: would you choose a life of mere undisturbedness – a life in which the primary achievement is the absence of trouble – over a life of "numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind"?[28] And the answer, obvious once the question is posed clearly, is no. A life of mere undisturbedness is not the fullest possible life. It is a life that has achieved the necessary condition for full pleasure without filling that condition with anything.

Consider also the examples of Torquatus and Cassius Longinus – Epicureans who did not retire from the world but engaged in it actively, including militarily, precisely because they understood that the goal was the fullest possible pleasurable life, not the minimal disturbance of a life carefully walled off from engagement. The ancient Epicureans who had access to all the texts and to living teachers of the philosophy did not choose quietism. They chose active engagement guided by the natural standard of pleasure and pain.

### The Misreading Makes Epicurus Boring

There is also a simpler and more honest reason to care about getting this right: the substitution of ataraxia for pleasure makes Epicurean philosophy boring. A philosophy whose goal is to achieve a state of minimal disturbance – to want as little as possible, to be troubled by as little as possible, to reduce all engagement with life to what is strictly necessary to sustain the undisturbed state – is not a philosophy that most people, encountering it for the first time, will find compelling, interesting, or genuinely relevant to how they want to live.

Epicurus at his authentic best is not boring. He is the philosopher who said he could not conceive of the good apart from the pleasures of taste, hearing, and sight. He is the philosopher whose follower Diogenes of Oinoanda, near the end

of his life, wanted to compose "an anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure."[29] He is the philosopher whose Roman spokesman described the ideal life as one of "numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind."[30] He is the philosopher who built a school – a community of friends living and working together in pursuit of the best life available to human beings – because friendship itself is among the greatest pleasures, and the pleasurable life requires the kind of community that makes deep friendship possible.

That philosophy – the authentic one – is not boring. It is exciting. It is life-affirming in a way that the tranquility-as-goal reading can never be, because it takes the full range of human pleasure seriously and asks how to achieve as much of it, as richly and as wisely, as the natural world and natural wisdom allow.

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## Part Seven: Restoring the Correct Picture

### Ataraxia in Its Proper Place

None of the foregoing is an argument against the importance of freedom from mental disturbance in Epicurean philosophy. Ataraxia is genuinely important – not as the goal, but as the condition of a mind that is in full possession of the pleasures that constitute the goal. A mind constantly tormented by irrational fear of the gods, terror of death, or the anxious craving for things beyond natural need cannot enjoy even the genuine pleasures available to it, because the anxiety constantly interferes with the enjoyment. Removing that anxiety – achieving the free, untroubled mental condition that ataraxia names – is essential to the pleasurable life. But it is essential as a condition, not as a destination.

The distinction is important and can be stated precisely. Ataraxia is what the mind is like when it is in full pleasure – when it has secured its goods, freed itself from irrational fears, established deep friendships, and is living in the clear light of a genuinely philosophical understanding of the world. Describing the mind in that state as "tranquil" or "undisturbed" is accurate – but it describes the condition of the mind in full pleasure, not a state above or beyond pleasure. The content of the pleasurable life – the friendships, the intellectual engagement, the adventures and achievements, the enjoyment of food and wine and natural beauty

and philosophical conversation – is not tranquility. It is pleasure. Ataraxia is the mental weather under which that pleasure is enjoyed, not the pleasure itself.

DeWitt's formulation captures the relationship precisely: the extension of the name of pleasure to the normal undisturbed state was Epicurus's major philosophical innovation. It means that the baseline of conscious life – health, ease, the absence of specific pains – is itself genuinely pleasurable, not a neutral zero waiting to be filled by external stimulation. And the mind that understands this is the mind that has achieved ataraxia in the genuine Epicurean sense: not a mind emptied of content, but a mind that correctly perceives the genuine pleasure in its own undisturbed condition and builds from that foundation toward the fullest possible pleasured life.

## The Standard Is Pleasure, The Goal Is Happiness

The *Letter to Menoeceus* is entirely consistent throughout: happiness is the destination, pleasure is the standard, and the life of the wise person is one in which pleasures predominate over pains across the full range of human experience. Ataraxia – freedom from mental disturbance – is what the mind of the wise person is like, not what the wise person is aiming at.

The practical guidance this provides is different from what the misreading would provide. The person who understands the goal correctly asks: how can I achieve the most genuine and most lasting pleasures available to me, using reason as the instrument to distinguish pleasures that deliver what they promise from those that conceal greater pains? They pursue friendship because friendship is among the greatest pleasures. They pursue intellectual understanding because the study of nature, as Epicurus wrote in the *Letter to Herodotus*, is where he personally found his own peace. They pursue the enjoyment of food, conversation, music, natural beauty, adventure and achievement because these are real pleasures and the pleasurable life is their goal. And they free themselves from irrational fear and anxious craving because these are real obstacles to the pleasures they are pursuing – not because the absence of fear is the thing they are ultimately after.

The person who substitutes ataraxia for happiness as the goal asks a different question: how can I minimize disturbance? And the answer to that question tends toward reduction – reduce desire, reduce engagement, reduce exposure to

anything that might disturb the undisturbed state. This is a life oriented toward the negative – toward the removal of things – rather than toward the positive and full pleasured life that Epicurus actually described.

Epicurus himself provided the corrective in the most personal terms available to him. Writing in the *Letter to Herodotus*, section 37, he described where his own peace came from: the investigation of nature. He urged it on others because he found his own happiness chiefly in a life so occupied. The happiness he described was not the stillness of a mind that has simply stopped being troubled. It was the active, engaged, intellectually alive pleasure of a mind working at what it finds most fulfilling – the investigation of the nature of things, pursued for its own sake because it is genuinely and directly one of the greatest pleasures available to a human being.

That is the Epicurean goal. Happiness through pleasure. Not ataraxia.



## Key Texts Referenced

- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Bailey translation, via Diogenes Laertius Book X): the primary text; happiness as the goal of philosophy; pleasure as the beginning and end of the blessed life; the definition of pleasure that includes freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance without reducing to them
- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 3 and 4 (Bailey translation): on the limit of pleasure and the structure of pain; the context-specific argument against Plato's "no limit" challenge, not a redefinition of the goal as the absence of pain
- Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, sections 37 and 78 (Bailey translation): Epicurus's personal statement that he finds his own peace in the investigation of nature; happiness depends on the study of natural science
- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book I, sections 42 and 62 (Rackham translation): the imagination test for the Epicurean goal; the wise man's continuous happiness through numerous and vivid pleasures of body and mind
- Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Books I and III (Bailey translation): the hymn to the study of nature as liberating pleasure; the life-affirming account of what genuine Epicurean philosophy aims at

- Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragments 3, 29, and 32 (M.F. Smith translation, Bibliopolis 1993 and 2003): available online at https://www.english.enoanda.cat/the_inscription.html – Fragment 3 on the anthem to the fullness of pleasure; Fragment 29 on happiness as the goal craved by nature; Fragment 32 on pleasure as the end of the best mode of life, with the virtues as means not ends
- Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1954), p. 240: the extension of the name of pleasure to the normal state as Epicurus's major philosophical innovation
- Companion articles: "The Full Cup Model: Pleasure, Purity, and the Limit That Answers Plato"; "The Norm Is Pleasure Too"; "Two Names for One Reality"; "A Gate To Be Burst – Absence of Pain"; "Natural Justice: The Epicurean Account," EpicurusToday.com

→ *Notes for this article*

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# The Perfect and the Good: An Epicurean View of Their Relationship

*Subtitle: Friends? Enemies? Both? Neither?*

> *"We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune."*[1] – Epicurus, Vatican Sayings 35

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## Introduction: A Proverb Worth Examining

"The perfect is the enemy of the good." Most people who use this phrase think of it as a modern piece of practical wisdom – perhaps from a business seminar, perhaps from a project management manual. In fact the sentiment is ancient. Voltaire, in his Dictionnaire Philosophique of 1764, cited an Italian proverb: *il meglio è l'inimico del bene* – the better is the enemy of the good. Shakespeare put a version of it in King Lear. Confucius observed something similar. And the thought that haunts the phrase is older still – as old as human beings who have ever abandoned something genuinely good because it was not quite good enough, or failed to act because the available options all fell short of some imagined ideal.

But the proverb, like most compressed wisdom, is incomplete. It captures something true and important while leaving something equally true and important unsaid. For there are times when the perfect is not the enemy of the good at all – when holding a vision of perfection before the mind is precisely what drives a person to achieve something genuinely excellent that they would otherwise have settled for something merely adequate. The artist who accepts the first passable

draft; the philosopher who rests content with the first plausible answer; the friend who decides that approximately good enough treatment of others is sufficient – in each of these cases, the abandonment of the aspiration toward perfection makes the achievable good worse, not better.

So the question is not simply whether the perfect is the enemy of the good. The question is: *when* is it the enemy, and *when* is it the friend? What distinguishes the use of the idea of perfection that elevates life from the use that paralyzes or poisons it?

Epicurus had a great deal to say about this question, though he did not frame it in precisely these terms. His philosophy contains both a careful account of when and how a model of perfection serves human happiness, and an equally careful account of when the demand for perfection becomes one of the primary sources of unnecessary human suffering. Working through both accounts, and understanding how they fit together, gives us what we might call the Epicurean theory of the perfect and the good – one that is more balanced, and more practically useful, than either the uncritical pursuit of perfection or its dismissal in favor of whatever happens to be available.

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## Part One: The Many Faces of the Proverb

Before turning to the Epicurean analysis, it is worth sorting through the several different things people mean when they invoke the idea that the perfect is the enemy of the good. The phrase covers at least four distinct phenomena, and they are not the same thing.

### The Paralysis Problem

The first and most common use of the proverb identifies what we might call the paralysis problem: the situation in which a person fails to act, or fails to complete a course of action, because no available option meets the standard of perfection they have set for themselves. The writer who cannot finish the book because every paragraph falls short of his ideal prose. The entrepreneur who never launches the business because the product is not yet exactly right. The person

who never forms a close friendship because every candidate has some flaw that falls short of the ideal friend they have imagined.

In each of these cases, the perfect is indeed the enemy of the good – not because the vision of perfection is itself harmful, but because it has been applied in the wrong way. The standard of perfection, which ought to serve as a target and a guide, has instead become a gatekeeper that prevents anything from proceeding unless it can first demonstrate its worthiness to proceed. The result is that nothing proceeds, and the good that was available – the imperfect but genuine good of the finished book, the launched business, the real friendship – is lost.

### The Depreciation Problem

The second use of the proverb identifies the depreciation problem: the situation in which a person possesses or experiences something genuinely good but cannot appreciate it because their attention is fixed on the ways in which it falls short of perfection. The partner who is warm, loyal, and genuinely loving, but who is constantly measured against some idealized romantic vision and found wanting. The life that is rich with friendship, intellectual engagement, and real pleasure, but that is experienced as empty because it does not match some imagined perfect life. The present moment that is comfortable and enjoyable, but that is mentally replaced by the perfect moment that is not currently available.

Here the perfect is the enemy of the good not by preventing action but by preventing appreciation. The good is present; the perfect is absent; and the presence of the absent perfect poisons the experience of the present good.

### The Perfectionist Trap

The third phenomenon is the perfectionist trap: the situation in which a person pursues the perfect so relentlessly that they exhaust themselves, damage their relationships, and generate more pain than pleasure in the name of an excellence that, when achieved, produces less satisfaction than they anticipated – because by the time it arrives, the goalposts have moved to a new standard of perfection beyond the one just reached.

This is the trap that afflicts certain kinds of high achievement. The scholar who works himself into exhaustion pursuing a perfect argument and produces a nervous breakdown instead of a masterpiece. The athlete who pursues perfect

performance at the cost of every other good in life and finds that gold medals do not produce the happiness that simpler goods would have provided at a fraction of the cost. The perfectionist whose standards guarantee that nothing they produce ever seems to them adequate, and whose life is therefore a continuous experience of falling short.

### The False Dichotomy

The fourth phenomenon is subtler and often overlooked: the false dichotomy between the perfect and the good, in which the absence of perfection is taken as a reason to abandon the good entirely, as if the only options are the ideal and the worthless. The person who, having discovered that no friendship is perfect, concludes that friendship is not worth pursuing. The person who, having found that pleasure always involves some element of impermanence or limitation, concludes that pleasure is not the genuine good it seemed to be. The person who, having determined that no political system can be perfectly just, concludes that justice is an illusion and withdraws from all civic engagement.

The same error afflicts the pursuit of knowledge. The person who recognizes that complete and perfect knowledge of any subject – let alone of the universe as a whole – is beyond human reach may conclude that genuine knowledge is therefore impossible, that no position on any question is better supported than any other, and that the appropriate response to the imperfection of human understanding is a blanket skepticism that surrenders the pursuit of truth entirely. This was precisely the error of the Academic Skeptics whom Epicurus attacked throughout his career: having identified that certainty of the Platonic kind was unavailable, they concluded that knowledge of any kind was unavailable, and settled into a philosophical paralysis that Epicurus found both intellectually dishonest and practically disastrous. The canonical standard he developed was designed specifically to answer this error: our senses, our feelings, and our capacity for reason give us genuine and reliable knowledge of the world, even if that knowledge is not the perfect omniscient knowledge of an imaginary god. Imperfect knowledge is still knowledge. The good of understanding is still a genuine good, even in the absence of the perfect understanding that no human being will ever possess.

The same dichotomy appears in the domain of time. A human life is limited – a finite span of years, bounded at both ends, incapable of the endless duration that would allow every good to be pursued to the fullest and every experience to be had in its richest form. The person who responds to this limitation by concluding that a finite life is therefore not genuinely worth living – that the good of a life of eighty years is nullified by the fact that it is not a life of eight hundred, or eight thousand, or endless years – has made the same mistake. Epicurus addressed this directly in *Principal Doctrine* 19: "Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure."[2] The finite life, lived wisely and fully, is not a deficient version of the infinite life. It is complete on its own terms. The cup that is full is full, whether it holds a pint or a gallon. The recognition that you cannot live forever is not a reason to depreciate the genuine good of the years you have; it is, if anything, a reason to appreciate them more fully and pursue their pleasures more wisely, knowing that neither the pleasures nor the time to enjoy them is unlimited.

Romance presents perhaps the most practically consequential version of the false dichotomy, and the one with the most specific and time-sensitive costs. The person who holds before themselves the image of a perfect partner – someone who combines every quality of intelligence, warmth, humor, physical attraction, shared values, and compatible temperament in the ideal proportion – and who therefore declines every actual candidate as falling short of that standard, has made a choice with consequences that compound over time. Marriage, children, and the establishment of a family are goods that must be pursued within a particular window of life or not at all. They are not like books that can be read at any age or travels that can be undertaken at sixty as well as at thirty. The person who is still searching for the perfect partner at fifty has not preserved their options; they have foreclosed most of them.

There is an old observation about this that states the problem with elegant precision: a man spent his life searching for the perfect woman. When at last he found her, he discovered that she was searching for the perfect man – and they never came together. The perfect, pursued by both parties with equal determination, defeated the good that was available to either one alone. This is not a failure of aspiration. It is a failure to recognize that the standard of the perfect, applied as a precondition for commitment rather than as a guide for living within one that

already exists, guarantees that genuine and available goods will be perpetually deferred until they are no longer available at all.

Epicurus valued friendship as the greatest of all goods. He also recognized that friendship – including the deepest forms of human partnership – requires commitment, investment, and the willingness to find genuine value in an actual person rather than an imagined ideal. Vatican Saying 28 states: *"We must not approve either those who are always ready for friendship, or those who hang back; but for friendship's sake we must even run risks."*[3] Running risks for friendship's sake means committing to actual people, with their actual imperfections, in the actual time available. The person who will only commit when the risk is zero – when the partner is perfect, when the outcome is guaranteed, when no disappointment is possible – will never commit at all, and will find in the end that the pursuit of the perfect partner has left them without the genuine goods of partnership, parenthood, and the deep human bonds that Epicurus consistently identified as among the most reliable sources of lasting pleasure.

In each of these cases, the recognition of imperfection leads not to paralysis or depreciation but to wholesale rejection – a nihilism of the good that is perhaps the most damaging of all the ways in which the perfect becomes the enemy.

This fourth form of the problem has a specific relevance to Epicurean philosophy, because it is precisely the move that the Platonic and Stoic traditions made against pleasure. Their argument ran as follows: pleasure, because it is impermanent, limited, and always capable of being more intense than it is, cannot be the genuine highest good. The genuine highest good must be perfect – eternal, complete, admitting of no further increase. Pleasure is none of these things. Therefore pleasure is not the genuine good that it appears to be, and we should look elsewhere.

Epicurus recognized this move and refuted it – and his refutation is, at its heart, a close analysis of the relationship between the perfect and the good. But before examining how he made that refutation, we need to look at the other side of the coin: the ways in which Epicurus considered the perfect to be the *friend* of the good rather than its enemy.

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## Part Two: When the Perfect Is the Friend of the Good

### The Gods as Models of the Best Possible Life

The most striking example of Epicurus using the idea of perfection as a positive guide to life is his treatment of the Epicurean gods. As noted in the companion articles on Epicurean physics and the Epicurean response to intelligent design, Epicurus did not deny the existence of gods. He denied that they were supernatural, omnipotent, or omniscient. He denied that they were creators, supervisors, or judges of universes or human affairs. But he affirmed their existence as beings who embody, in the fullest possible degree, the goods that Epicurean philosophy identifies as the goal of human life: numerous pleasures of body and mind, freedom from disturbance, blessed serenity, perfect friendship among themselves, and the complete absence of fear, anxiety, and unfulfilled craving.

The Epicurean gods live in the spaces between worlds – the *intermundia* – in a condition of perfect and undisturbed blessedness. They are not troubled by the need to create or govern. They are not subject to the anxiety of uncertain outcomes. They experience no unfulfilled desire, no unrelieved pain, no fear of death. They are, in the most complete sense available, the model of what the Epicurean ethical ideal looks like when realized in the fullest possible degree.

Velleius, Cicero's Epicurean spokesman in *On the Nature of the Gods*, describes this picture:

> *"Their life is the happiest conceivable, and the one most bountifully furnished with all good things. God is entirely inactive and free from all ties of occupation; he toils not neither does he labour, but he takes delight in his own wisdom and virtue, and knows with absolute certainty that he will always enjoy pleasures at once consummate and everlasting."*[4] – Velleius in Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I.51

This is important: the Epicurean god is not perfect in the Platonic sense of being an abstract eternal Form. The Epicurean god is perfect in the sense of living the Epicurean life in its fullest expression – experiencing pleasure without anxiety, friendship without jealousy, intellectual engagement without disturbance, and

the complete realization of all the goods that human beings pursue in partial and imperfect forms.

Why does this matter for the relationship between the perfect and the good? Because the Epicurean gods serve as what we might call an orienting model – a concrete image of what a life fully given over to pleasure, wisdom, and freedom from fear looks like when nothing hinders it. They are not a demand that human beings achieve the impossible. They are a picture of the direction in which human life should move. Epicurus explicitly invited his students to contemplate the divine life as a source of guidance and aspiration:

> *"Accustom yourself to the belief that death is nothing to us... For the wise man does not depreciate the life that is present, and he is not afraid of that which is not life... Meditate on these things and on related things night and day, by yourself and with someone like yourself, and you will never be disturbed waking or sleeping, and you will live as a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal goods is not like a mortal being at all."*[5] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

"Live as a god among men."[6] This is the Epicurean aspiration. Not a demand for literal divine perfection, but an invitation to orient life by the model of perfect blessedness – freedom from fear, freedom from anxiety, richness of pleasure, depth of friendship – and to approximate that model as fully as human circumstances allow. The perfect life of the gods is the friend of the good life of the human being, not its enemy, because it provides a concrete and inspiring image of what the human pursuit of pleasure is aimed at.

### The Vatican Saying on Reverencing the Sage

Vatican Saying 32 makes a complementary point from a different angle:[7]

> *"The reverence of the wise man is a great good for those who reverence him."*[8] – Epicurus, Vatican Sayings 32[9]

This saying captures something that is easy to underestimate. The sage – the person who has most fully realized Epicurean wisdom, who lives with minimal unnecessary pain, who has freed himself from the irrational fears that distort ordinary human life, who cultivates friendship and intellectual engagement and the full appreciation of available pleasure – is not perfect in any absolute sense. But

he or she represents a human approximation of the best that human nature can achieve. And the act of reverencing such a person – of genuinely admiring and orienting oneself by reference to their example – benefits the person who does the reverencing.

This is a key observation. We become, in significant part, what we admire. The person who admires wealth accumulation tends to direct their life toward wealth accumulation, with whatever consequences follow from that. The person who admires cruelty tends to become more comfortable with cruelty. And the person who genuinely admires the Epicurean sage – who finds in the sage's example something genuinely inspiring and worth emulating – tends to move in the direction of wisdom, pleasure wisely pursued, and freedom from unnecessary fear.

The Vatican Saying identifies reverence for the near-perfect as a good for the person who reveres. This is the perfect in service of the good: the contemplation and admiration of something that exceeds what we have currently achieved functions as a guide, a motivator, and a standard that improves the quality of what we actually do achieve.

The same principle extends beyond the reverencing of specific sages. The Epicurean habit of reading and rereading the texts of Epicurus himself – a practice explicitly encouraged throughout the school's history – served the same function. As Epicurus wrote to Menoeceus:

> *"Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men."*[10] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (DL X.135)[11]

The repeated contemplation of the best available wisdom is itself a good, and it is a good that arises precisely from the gap between where one currently is and where the model points. The perfect – or the best available approximation of it – functions as a friend of the good whenever it serves as this kind of orienting reference point.

### The Full Cup and Aspiration

There is a further dimension of the perfect-as-friend that emerges from the Full Cup model analyzed in the companion article on this site. Recall that the Epi-

curean picture of the best life – *plena et conferta voluptatibus*, full and crammed with pleasures, as the Roman Epicurean source describes it – is itself a picture of fullness, of completion, of something that cannot be made more than it is. The Epicurean ideal is not the austere minimum of mere absence of pain; it is the rich maximum of a life as full of genuine pleasure as wisdom and circumstance can make it.

This ideal of the full pleasurable life functions as a standard of aspiration in exactly the way that the divine model does. The person who understands that the goal is a life crammed with vivid pleasures of body and mind does not rest content with a merely adequate supply of pleasure. They actively pursue the good more fully, more wisely, and more energetically than the person who has no such standard in view. Here the aspiration toward the most complete possible version of the good life serves the actual achievement of a better version of it. The more perfect serves the more good.

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## Part Three: When the Perfect Is the Enemy of the Good

### The Stoic and Platonic Trap: Denying the Good Because It Is Not Perfect

Epicurus identified the most philosophically damaging version of the perfect-as-enemy in the position taken by the Platonist and Stoic traditions on pleasure. The core of the Platonic argument against pleasure as the highest good was this: pleasure is always capable of increase, always impermanent, always limited, and therefore can never constitute the completed and perfect good that the highest good must be. Because pleasure is imperfect, it cannot be the genuine good.

This is the false dichotomy problem in its most damaging form. Rather than accepting that the genuine good is an imperfect good – that pleasure is genuinely good even though it is impermanent and limited – Plato and the Stoics concluded that pleasure was not genuinely good at all, or at best was a minor and unimportant element in the good life, to be tolerated but not pursued. The ideal of perfect goodness became the enemy of the real and available good of pleasure.

Epicurus rejected this move at its foundation. His response, captured in *Principal Doctrines* 3 and 4, is that pleasure does have a limit – that the notion of perfect goodness does apply to pleasure – and that therefore the Platonic argument fails. But equally important is the broader lesson his response implies: that when the demand for perfection is used to discredit what is genuinely good rather than to improve it, the demand has become a weapon against human happiness rather than an instrument in its service.

The person who refuses to find joy in the pleasures of friendship, food, intellectual engagement, and physical health because these pleasures are impermanent has not achieved a higher wisdom. They have used an abstract philosophical standard to impoverish their actual life. The perfect has become the enemy of the good in the most literal and most damaging way.

### The Paralysis of the Unachievable

Principal Doctrine 21 addresses a form of the paralysis problem directly:[12]

> *"He who understands the limits of life knows that it is easy to obtain that which removes the pain of want and makes the whole of life complete and perfect. So that he has no need of things that involve struggle."*[13] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 21[14]

The person who has understood what is actually required for a complete and good life – and Epicurus is insistent that this is far less than most people suppose – is freed from the paralysis that comes from pursuing goods that are either unobtainable or that require more struggle than they return in pleasure. The person who has not made this understanding their own is doomed to perpetual striving after a perfection of external provision – wealth, status, fame, power – that recedes as it is approached and that delivers far less than anticipated when it is reached.

This is the insight captured in Vatican Saying 35, which opens this article: "We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune."[15] The person who is perpetually oriented toward what he does not have – toward the more perfect version of his situation – cannot fully appreciate what he actually possesses. The friendship he has is real and valuable. The pleasures of the present moment are genuine. The

health or intellectual engagement or natural beauty that is available right now is good. To allow an imagined more perfect version of these goods to displace the appreciation of the actual versions is to allow the perfect to rob you of the good you have.

The Epicurean classification of desires is directly relevant here. Natural and necessary desires – for food, shelter, friendship, intellectual understanding, freedom from pain – are easily satisfied. Their satisfaction constitutes the foundation of a genuinely good life, available to almost anyone regardless of fortune. Natural but unnecessary desires – for particular foods, particular kinds of companionship, particular intellectual pleasures – add richness to life when they can be satisfied without generating excessive anxiety or pain in the pursuit. Vain desires – for fame, unlimited wealth, power, immortality – are unobtainable in any stable form, and their pursuit generates more pain than any pleasure they can deliver.

The classification is, at its heart, an analysis of when aspiration serves the good and when it becomes its enemy. Natural desires point toward goods that are genuinely achievable and that genuinely satisfy when achieved. Vain desires point toward a kind of perfection that is not genuinely achievable and that, even if approximated, does not deliver the satisfaction that was expected. The person who orients their life by vain desires has allowed the perfect – or rather the illusion of the perfect – to become the enemy of the good that was always within reach.

## The Depreciation of the Present Good

The second Vatican Saying already cited – "We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not" – points directly at the depreciation problem.[16] But Epicurus's treatment of this theme is richer than a single saying, and it is worth developing it further.

The Epicurean corrective to the depreciation problem is grounded directly in the texts, and it operates very differently from what might first come to mind. It is tempting to think that the remedy for failing to appreciate what you have is to contemplate how much worse things could be – to practice a kind of deliberate imagining of loss or disaster as a way of shocking yourself into gratitude. This is

indeed a technique that some philosophical traditions have recommended: something like it appears in the Cyrenaic school, and modern Stoic writers have associated a version of it, under the label "negative visualization," with the practical side of Stoic ethics. But this is not the Epicurean approach, and it is worth being clear about the difference. Epicurus was not in the business of cultivating imagined losses or manufactured fear as instruments of appreciation. His rejection of unnecessary fear was systematic and principled, and a technique that deliberately summons anxious thoughts about what could go wrong sits very uneasily with that rejection.

The Epicurean remedy for the depreciation of present goods is not the contemplation of worse possibilities but the active and grateful memory of past goods combined with a clear-eyed recognition of what is present right now. Vatican Saying 35 states it precisely: *"We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune."*[17] The Greek word Bailey renders "gift of fortune" (*euktaia*) means the things one wishes for: what we have now was once only wished for, and it came to us without any guarantee that it would. The instruction here is not "imagine losing what you have" but "remember when you did not yet have it." The memory is not of imagined disaster but of genuine past experience – of the time before you had the friendship, the health, the security, the intellectual engagement that you now take for granted. That remembered experience of absence is real, not manufactured, and it restores the sense of what the present good actually is without requiring any deliberate cultivation of fear or anxiety.

Torquatus, in Cicero's *On Ends*, gives the fullest account of what this looks like in the wise man's life:

> *"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."*[18] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book One, 62

"The present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness."[19] This is the antidote to depreciation that Epicurus actually recommended: not anxiety about what could be lost but a fully present and grateful awareness of what is actually there. The mechanism is memory – genuine

memory of past goods and past hopes – combined with the philosophical understanding, developed in the companion articles on the Full Cup and the Norm of Pleasure, that the present state of health, companionship, and freedom from pain is itself genuinely and fully good, not a pale waiting room for some better state yet to come.

Vatican Saying 69 identifies the root of the depreciation failure: *"The ingratitude of the soul makes a creature greedy for endless variation in its way of life."*[20] Ingratitude – the failure to recognize and appreciate what is genuinely present – is the cause of the restless pursuit of the always-absent perfect. The cure is not anxiety but its opposite: the cultivated recognition, grounded in memory and philosophical understanding, that what is present is genuinely good and genuinely worth appreciating.

The mechanism by which the perfect becomes the enemy of the good, in the depreciation mode, is the replacement of attention to what is actually present with a fixed orientation toward what is absent. The solution Epicurus points toward is the opposite: return attention fully to what is actually present, remember when it was absent and only wished for, and recognize that what is present is genuinely and fully good – not a deficient version of the perfect, but the real good that is actually available and actually worth celebrating.

Vatican Saying 69 makes this point with characteristic precision:[21]

> *"The ingratitude of the soul makes a creature greedy for endless variation in its way of life."*[22] – Epicurus, Vatican Sayings 69[23]

"Ingratitude of the soul" – the failure to appreciate what is actually present – drives the restless pursuit of endless variation, of the next thing that will finally be satisfying, of the version of life that will at last meet the standard set by the imagined ideal. This restlessness is not the energy of genuine aspiration; it is the energy of dissatisfaction with the good that is present, driven by the imagined perfection that is absent. And it is, for Epicurus, one of the primary sources of unnecessary suffering – the suffering that comes not from actual pain but from the refusal to recognize and appreciate the genuine good that is already there.

### Excessive Focus on Defects

Closely related to the depreciation problem is what we might call the defect-focus problem: the habit of attending primarily to the ways in which something falls short of perfection rather than to its genuine good qualities. This is a form of the perfect-as-enemy that operates specifically through the critical faculty – the capacity to notice imperfection – being applied without the balancing capacity to notice genuine value.

Lucretius addresses this in a vivid passage in Book IV of *De Rerum Natura*, where he describes the way in which a lover's passion distorts his perception of the beloved, causing him to read faults as virtues. While Lucretius's immediate concern is with the self-deceptions of erotic love, the broader principle he is illustrating applies throughout the domain of value: our perception of what we are in relation to is systematically distorted by the emotional charge we bring to it, and the distortion typically runs in one of two directions – either romanticizing something and being blind to its genuine faults, or focusing relentlessly on its faults and being blind to its genuine value.

The Epicurean corrective is not to stop noticing faults – honest perception is part of the canonical standard – but to ensure that the perception of faults is held in proportion to the perception of genuine value. The friendship that has some imperfections is still a genuine friendship with genuine value. The pleasure that is impermanent is still a genuine pleasure while it lasts. The life that falls short of the divine model in a dozen ways is still a genuinely good life, worth living and appreciating, if it contains more pleasure than pain and is conducted with wisdom and the enjoyment of what is actually available.

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## Part Four: The Synthesis – How the Perfect Serves the Good

### The Standard That Guides Without Tyrannizing

The key to the Epicurean synthesis of these two sides of the relationship is a distinction between using the idea of perfection as a guide and using it as a demand. The same model – the divine life of the Epicurean gods, the wisdom of the sage,

the full cup of vivid pleasure – can function in either mode, and the difference between the two modes is the difference between an Epicurean and a Platonist.

For the Platonist, the eternal Forms are the only true realities, and physical goods are real only insofar as they participate in those Forms. The perfect is the standard against which all goods are measured, and what falls short is, to that degree, not genuinely good. This is the use of the idea of perfection as a demand: measure everything against the standard, find everything deficient, conclude that genuine good is not available in the physical world and must be sought in the realm of the eternal.

For the Epicurean, the divine model is a concrete inspiring picture of what the goods we actually pursue look like in their fullest realization. Pleasure, friendship, freedom from fear, intellectual engagement – these are the goods. The divine life shows us what these goods are like when nothing limits or distorts them. This vision does not discredit the imperfect versions of these goods that are actually available; it reveals what those goods are genuinely aimed at and motivates the serious and energetic pursuit of them. The perfect is the guide rather than the gatekeeper.

The difference can be stated simply: the Epicurean uses the model of perfection to understand and pursue the good more fully. The Platonist uses the model of perfection to demonstrate that the available good is not the real thing.

### The Wise Man's Relationship to Perfection

What does the Epicurean wise man actually do with the idea of perfection? Several things, drawn from the texts:

**He aspires to live as much as possible like the gods** – free from fear, rich in pleasure, established in friendship, free from anxiety about the future – while accepting without distress that complete divine blessedness is beyond human reach. He aims at the model without being destroyed by the gap between the model and his achievement.

**He reveres those who have approximated wisdom more fully than he has**, recognizing that this reverence benefits him by orienting his own life by a better example than he might otherwise find.

**He appreciates what is genuinely present** rather than being perpetually oriented toward what is absent. He knows, as Vatican Saying 35 puts it, that "what we have too was the gift of fortune": what he has now was once only wished for. [24]

**He pursues the best available option** rather than refusing to act because no option is perfect. He launches the ship when the winds are good enough, writes the book when it is ready enough to help, forms the friendship when the person is good enough to be worth knowing.

**He applies reason to the pursuit of pleasure** – not to replace pleasure with some higher abstract good, but to ensure that the pleasures he pursues are genuinely satisfying and do not generate more pain than they deliver. This is the only form of perfectionism the Epicurean endorses: the careful and rational maximization of actual pleasure, conducted in the full recognition that perfection in this pursuit is an aspiration rather than a requirement.

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## Conclusion: Friends, Enemies, Both – and When

The proverb says the perfect is the enemy of the good. The Epicurean analysis says: it depends entirely on what you do with the perfect.

The perfect is the friend of the good when it functions as an orienting model – a concrete picture of what the goods we are pursuing look like in their fullest realization. The Epicurean gods, the Epicurean sage, the full cup of vivid pleasure: each of these serves as a guide that elevates the actual pursuit of good things. The person who keeps such models before their mind tends to pursue the genuinely good more energetically, more wisely, and with more appreciation for what they achieve, than the person who has no standard in view.

The perfect is the enemy of the good when it functions as a gatekeeper – a standard that must be met before any actual pursuit of good things is permitted to proceed, or that is used to discredit the genuine value of available goods because they fall short of the ideal. The Platonist who concludes that pleasure is not genuinely good because it is impermanent and limited; the perfectionist who never acts because no available option is good enough; the dissatisfied person

who cannot appreciate what they have because it does not match the imagined ideal; the nihilist who abandons the pursuit of friendship because no friendship is perfect – all of these have allowed the perfect to become the enemy of the good that was genuinely available to them.

Epicurus's philosophy threads the needle between these two errors with characteristic precision. Aspire to the best. Revere the wisest. Keep the model of the full and blessed life clearly in view. And then live – actually live, with the actual goods that are actually present, in the actual friendships and actual pleasures and actual freedom from pain that actual life can deliver.

As Diogenes of Oinoanda carved on his great wall for all passersby to read: the goal is an anthem to the fullness of pleasure. Not the fullness of a perfect pleasure that is never quite available. The fullness of pleasure that is here, now, genuinely good, genuinely worth celebrating – and made more fully and more consciously good by the aspiration toward its best possible realization.

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## Key Texts Referenced

- Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 28, 32, 35, 69
- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (on living as a god among men)
- Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles* (on cherishing the doctrines night and day)
- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 3, 4, and 21
- Velleius in Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* Book I (on the Epicurean conception of the gods as models of perfect blessedness)
- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book I, sections 56–57 and 62 (on the wise man's grateful memory and present awareness); Book I generally (on the full pleasurable life as the goal)
- Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book IV (on the distortion of perception by emotional charge)
- Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 3 (on the anthem to the fullness of pleasure)

- Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764), article "Art dramatique" (citing *il meglio è l'inimico del bene*)
- Companion articles: "The Full Cup Model: Pleasure, Purity, and the Limit That Answers Plato," "The Norm Is Pleasure Too," "Epicurean Responses to the Intelligent Design Argument," EpicurusToday.com.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# How Is The Wise Epicurean Always Happy

There are as many opinions about happiness as there are people. Everyone has their own idea of what happiness is or should be. Some say that we should look to religion for happiness. Others say that there are no hard and fast rules, so if it feels good do it. But most people say that the key to happiness is virtue - being a "good" person.

In the history of the West, there was one leader – Epicurus – who taught something dramatically different. The teachings of Epicurus were once widely popular. At the time of Julius Caesar most leading Romans were at least partly Epicurean. Even an opponent like Cicero admitted that Epicurus had "taken the Roman world by storm." Epicurus was popular because he taught a common-sense approach to being happy. He did not look to supernatural gods or high-sounding ideals. Instead, Epicurus taught that we should look to Nature. Nature herself leads us through pleasure and pain. A happy life is simply a life in which we experience more pleasure than pain.

What exactly is pleasure? Today there is much debate over what Epicurus meant when he talked about pleasure and happiness. Some say that Epicurus was a slacker who had no ambition and avoided all work and effort. They allege that he fled from social responsibility and ran straight into the arms of wine, women, and song. Others say the opposite. These people say that Epicurus taught self-denial. They allege that Epicurus advised us to seek only the most simple and necessary of pleasures. Most of what Epicurus himself wrote is now lost. In one letter that survives, however, Epicurus wrote that pleasure is the beginning and the end of the happy life. That seems clear enough. However in the same letter Epicurus also wrote that by pleasure we mean the absence of pain.

Based on this statement, some people argue that Epicurus was actually more like a Buddhist or Stoic. These people say that absence of pain does not mean what we normally think of as pleasure. So what did Epicurus really teach when he spoke of absence of pain? Unless we have more information, saying that something is absent tells us nothing about what is present. Today we cannot ask Epicurus what he meant. Fortunately many Greek and Roman writers of the time tell us what they understood Epicurus to be saying. These writers were very clear. Epicurus included within the word pleasure the same kinds of bodily and mental stimulation that we think of today.

One of Epicurus' most famous sayings was that he would not know what good is without the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form. Epicurus also spoke often about the joy and delight that we obtain through friendship, philosophy, and the study of nature. These too come within the meaning of the word pleasure. We can therefore be sure that Epicurus endorsed the same kinds of activities that we normally think of as pleasure. But calling these activities pleasure does not mean that Epicurus was a party animal.

Almost everyone agrees that Epicurus himself led a very sober and self-disciplined life. The statues of Epicurus that survive from the ancient world are all very similar. Each one shows Epicurus with an intense and serious look in his eyes. Epicurus definitely took pleasure seriously, but he did not chase it through fast and loose living. Epicurus taught that the key to pleasure is in how we pursue it. He did not tell us to restrict pleasure to include only those that are necessary to remove bodily pain. In fact he did the opposite. Epicurus told us to expand our view of pleasure. He pointed out that humans are much more than passive receivers of outside stimulation. Once we understand our place in Nature our minds are well equipped to generate pleasure on their own.

Epicurus pointed out that we experience as pleasure everything in life that we consider to be desirable. There are many different types of mental and physical pleasures and pains. Everything that we feel to be desirable we call pleasure. Everything we feel to be undesirable we call pain. In the end, all feelings resolve down into pleasure or pain. Whenever there are only two possibilities, the absence of one means the other is present. That's exactly what Epicurus said about

pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain in any part of the body or mind are mutually exclusive. Wherever pleasure is present, that part of the mind or body is not feeling pain. The phrase absence of pain therefore means nothing more or less than the word pleasure itself.

But here is an important question. Does talking about absence of pain tell us what specific pleasure is present? The answer is no, not any more than the word pleasure alone tells us what specific pleasure we are feeling. Pleasures and pains differ widely in intensity, in duration, and in the parts of the mind or body they affect. Every pleasure and pain is different. Only by listening to the feelings given to us by Nature can we know what is pleasant and what is painful. What evidence do we have that Epicurus viewed absence of pain the same as pleasure?

The famous Roman Senator Cicero disliked Epicurus so much that he wrote lengthy books against him. Cicero denounced the pursuit of pleasure as unworthy, and he praised suffering and virtue as noble. Years later the books of Cicero found favor with the Judeo-Christians. These religious authorities preserved Cicero's books and destroyed most of what was left of what Epicurus had written. Cicero may have opposed Epicurus, but he had many friends who were Epicureans. One such friend was Torquatus, a military and political leader from a distinguished Roman family. Torquatus was a strong follower of Epicurus. Torquatus explained what Epicurus taught in this way: Anyone who totally and permanently loses all feeling is the same as dead. From this we can conclude that Nature herself, through the feelings she gives us, is the true judge of what is agreeable or disagreeable.

Everything we feel is either pleasurable or painful. If we are aware of our condition at all, what we are feeling is pleasure or pain. There is no middle ground and no third alternative. Since pleasures are desirable and pains are not, our goal should be to fill as much of our life as possible with pleasures. From this point of view it is easy to understand what Epicurus meant by absence of pain. Whenever we remove any pain of mind or body, whatever replaces it is pleasure. For Epicurus the word pleasure never changes its meaning. Pleasure always refers to something that we find to be desirable. The specific mental or bodily activity that we find to be pleasurable will depend entirely on our personal circumstances and

feelings. Whether we call the goal of life pleasure or absence of pain is of no consequence.

But if we think of the goal as absence of pain, does this mean that we must be entirely free from pain before we can consider ourselves to be happy? Of course not, and Epicurus was very clear about this. At the time of his death, Epicurus was in severe pain due to kidney disease. Nevertheless Epicurus wrote that these days were among the happiest of his life. How could Epicurus be happy even while in severe pain? Because happiness does not require complete absence of all pain.

In fact, we often choose things that are painful when that choice leads to greater pleasure or less pain later. Epicurus' physical pain did not prevent him from being happy. Even while in pain, Epicurus was still able to feel the pleasures of friendship and of philosophical insight. Pleasures in one part of life can outweigh pains in other parts of life when we realize that the perfect is not the enemy of the good.

Opposing philosophers argued that viewing happiness this way makes no sense because happiness is an all-or-nothing proposition. They argued that we can never reach complete pleasure because the desire for pleasure can never be satisfied. They also argued that bodily pleasure is beyond our control and that we can never be free of the fear of losing it. Epicurus rejected those arguments. He pointed out that the desire for pleasure can in fact be satisfied. There is a limit to the number of things any single person can experience in life. It is impossible to fill our experience beyond that limit. Once we fill our experience with pleasure, it is impossible to experience any additional pleasure. Of course over time we can pursue new pleasures, but variety does not make what is already full more full.

Variety adds no new intensity to our feeling, no new parts to our body, no more hours to our day. If we view pleasure wisely, no matter how long we live, we do not gain a level of pleasure beyond what we can experience here and now. Epicurus also rejected the idea that we must live in fear of suffering more pain than pleasure. The wise Epicurean can find more pleasure than pain in almost any situation. No matter how severe it is, pain never has the power to hold us in its grip permanently.

Torquatus illustrated this view of pleasure by repeating a story once told by his father.

As the story went, a Stoic philosopher held up his hand and asked, "Does a hand in its normal condition feel pleasure?"

The Stoic expected his listeners to say "No," because people tend to think that pleasure requires stimulation from the outside. The Stoic claimed that everyone who answered "No" was proving that Nature does not establish pleasure as the goal of life. He argued that if Nature wished us to pursue pleasure, Nature herself would complain whenever we are not feeling stimulation.

Torquatus pointed out that this argument is false and in no way undercuts Epicurus. So long as we are not feeling pain, our bodies do not complain about lack of stimulation. Nature herself recognizes that a healthy and normal life without pain is pleasurable.

Was Epicurus right to expand his view of pleasure in this way? Yes, but to understand this fully we must first know what Epicurus taught about the universe and our place in it.

Epicurus taught that the most important issues in life depend for their answers on one question: Is the universe natural, or is the universe designed, created, and managed by supernatural forces?

Unless we can answer that question with confidence, we can never be confident about anything else. Epicurus told us to look for the answer in our own experience. We see around us that nothing ever comes from nothing or goes to nothing. From this simple starting point we can reason step by step to reach answers to the most important questions of life.

Since nothing comes from nothing or goes to nothing, the universe as a whole has always existed and will always exist. Nothing exists that is not a part of the universe, so the universe is infinite in size. Everything that we experience is a result of atoms moving naturally and forever through space. The universe was not created, nor is it governed, by supernatural forces.

Nature herself tells us through our senses what is real. Whatever is real is possible, and what is possible can happen over and over again, since Nature never creates only a single thing of a kind. Just as there is life here on Earth, reason tells

us that life exists throughout the universe. Life on Earth is neither supernatural nor unique. The universe as a whole is both eternal in time and infinite in size, so nothing can exist outside of nature.

Nature herself gives us all the evidence we need to live our lives happily. The evidence of nature tells us that there are no heavens, no hells, and no supernatural beings running things from behind the scenes. Once we are confident of this big picture, we see that human birth and death are just as natural as anything else. There is no reason to be afraid of death. When we die we will no longer exist, and we will only be in the same condition as we were before we were born. Nothing harmful ever happened to us before we were born. For the same reason we can be confident that nothing harmful will happen to us after we die.

It is not sad or depressing to know that when we die we cease to exist. To the contrary, when we see that death is final we see how valuable life really is. Once we appreciate its true value, we realize that we are justified in holding that every moment of life that is not painful is pleasurable.

People such as Epicurus, who love life, see this viewpoint as liberating and invigorating. All of us know how life becomes extremely valuable when someone is told that they have a fatal disease. In the same way, what can be more motivating than to know with confidence that we only live once?

But there is a common mistake that must be avoided at all costs. Some people believe that Stoicism and Asceticism are admirable. They think that there is nobility in suffering and disgrace in pleasure. These people argue that when Epicurus spoke of absence of pain he was agreeing with them and speaking of something very different from pleasure.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Epicurus taught that virtue leads to strength and independence. But Epicurus did not pursue virtue as a goal in itself. Epicurus taught that living virtuously is desirable for the pleasure that virtue brings, not because virtue is an end in itself.

The ancients who wrote about him did not say that Epicurus ever abandoned normal pleasures for the sake of virtue. Instead, they attacked Epicurus for pursuing normal pleasures too much.

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# Guilty As Charged: Cicero's Deceit In Attacking Epicurean Pleasure

*Subtitle: How Cicero's Deceit in Attacking Epicurean Pleasure Is Impeached By Cicero's Own Testimony*

> *"Cicero was a crafty old trial lawyer and he deliberately argued to make points, because he was pleading before a reading audience, which functions like a jury, and his shrewd legal mind had long discerned the vulnerability of Epicureanism before this style of attack... I do not believe he could have misrepresented the truth so successfully had he not understood it completely."*[1] – Norman DeWitt, review of Mary N. Porter Packer's *Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics*, American Journal of Philology, 1939

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## Introduction: The Charge Against the Charger

The ancient world produced no more skilled, more eloquent, or more persistent critic of Epicurean philosophy than Marcus Tullius Cicero. His *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum – On the Ends of Good and Evil* – remains the single most important ancient source for understanding the Epicurean ethical system in dialogue with its Stoic and Academic rivals, precisely because Cicero was intelligent enough to understand what he was arguing against and skilled enough to present it in a form that a Roman reading audience would engage with seriously. Torquatus, his Epicurean spokesman in Books I and II of that work, remains one of the clearest and most powerful ancient presentations of Epicurean ethics. For this, generations of scholars have been grateful to Cicero.

But Cicero was not writing a treatise. He was arguing a case. And Norman DeWitt, reviewing Mary N. Porter Packer's 1938 dissertation *Cicero's Presenta-*

*tion of Epicurean Ethics*, identified with surgical precision the distinction that matters:

> *"Every debater has the choice of arguing to reveal the truth in its entirety or of arguing to make points. The former method is adapted to the Supreme Court, the latter to a trial by jury. Cicero was a crafty old trial lawyer and he deliberately argued to make points, because he was pleading before a reading audience, which functions like a jury."*[2]

Packer's study had concluded that Cicero failed to understand Epicureanism as a unified philosophy but was not deliberately unfair. DeWitt took sharp exception to the acquittal: Cicero understood Epicureanism perfectly – which was precisely why his misrepresentation of it was so effective. He could only have deceived so successfully if he knew exactly where the pressure points were and where the truth could be safely distorted without the distortion being obvious.

This article examines one of Cicero's most damaging specific charges against Epicurus – the charge that Epicurus denied that intellectual pursuits such as the study of literature, history, and philosophy are pleasurable in themselves – and shows how that charge is refuted not only by Epicurus's own surviving texts but by Cicero's own other writings. The evidence that convicts Cicero of arguing to make points rather than to reveal truth is the evidence Cicero himself supplied. DeWitt's verdict of deliberate deceit, in this case, is confirmed by the very witness who should have been able to defeat it.



## Part One: The Scene at Cumae and the Charge Before Torquatus Speaks

### The Setting of On Ends Books I and II

*On Ends* is written as a dialogue set at Cicero's villa at Cumae. Cicero and his companions encounter Lucius Manlius Torquatus – a historical Roman of distinguished family who was indeed an Epicurean – and the conversation that follows is the fullest presentation of Epicurean ethics available in the Latin tradition. The dialogue is not a neutral academic exercise. Cicero controls the structure, the framing, the objections, and the final judgment. Torquatus is given a

substantial speech – a significant part of Book I – to present the Epicurean position, and Cicero then takes the whole of Book II to demolish it. The deck is stacked from the beginning.

What makes this relevant for the present article is the specific charge Cicero presses against Epicurus near the *end* of Book I, after Torquatus has given his main speech presenting the Epicurean position. Having heard Torquatus's defense of Epicurean ethics in full, Cicero turns directly to Torquatus and Triarius – the two Epicureans in the dialogue – and makes what is perhaps the most rhetorically effective single charge in the entire work. The placement is deliberate: it comes after Torquatus has spoken but before Cicero's full response in Book II, so it lands in the audience's mind as a summarizing judgment on what they have just heard. This is Cicero at his most skillful as an advocate – and, as we shall see, at his most deceptive.

## The Charge: Epicurus Cannot Claim That Intellectual Pursuits Are Pleasurable

The charge appears near the end of Book I, after Torquatus has given his main speech presenting the Epicurean position. Cicero turns to address Torquatus and his fellow Epicurean Triarius directly, and what follows is one of the most revealing passages in the entire work. It is worth reading carefully in the Yonge translation because the argument Cicero is making is more elaborate – and more deceptive – than a simple dismissal of intellectual pleasures:

> *"What pleasure do you, O Torquatus, what pleasure does this Triarius derive from literature, and history, and the knowledge of events, and the reading of poets, and his wonderful recollection of such numbers of verses? And do not say to me, Why all these things are a pleasure to me. So, too, were those noble actions to the Torquati. Epicurus never asserts this in this manner; nor would you, O Triarius, nor any man who had any wisdom, or who had ever imbibed those principles... For if it were once granted, even although there were no reference whatever to the body, that these things were naturally and intrinsically pleasant; then virtue and knowledge would be intrinsically desirable. And this is the last thing which he would choose to admit."*[3] – Cicero, *On Ends* Book I (Yonge translation)

Read quickly, this looks like the charge that Epicurus denied the pleasurableness of intellectual activity. But read carefully, it is something more subtle and more dishonest. Cicero is not merely saying that Epicurus failed to appreciate literature and poetry. He is constructing what lawyers call a dilemma: a trap with two horns, both of which damage the opponent.

The first horn: if Epicurus admitted that intellectual pursuits like literature, history, and poetry are pleasurable *in themselves* – not because of any bodily benefit, not because they remove some pain of want, but simply as the mental activities they are – then he would have to admit that *non-bodily* things can be intrinsically pleasant. And if non-bodily things can be intrinsically pleasant, then virtue and knowledge could also be intrinsically desirable – precisely the Stoic and Platonic conclusion that Epicurus spent his career arguing against.

The second horn: if Epicurus denied that intellectual pursuits are pleasurable in themselves, then his philosophy is exposed as the position of a man who cannot account for the very pleasures that the Roman educated class most valued – the pleasures of literature, poetry, history, and philosophical reflection. He is either a hypocrite (since his followers visibly enjoy these things) or a philosophical barbarian.

This is trial-lawyer argumentation of the highest quality. The implicit message to Cicero's Roman reading audience – men who had spent their lives being formed by precisely the literary and cultural education Cicero is describing – is unmistakable: Epicurus cannot give you an account of your own pleasures that does not either embarrass his philosophy or concede the Stoic and Platonic ground. Either way, Epicureanism loses.

What makes the charge deceptive is the false dilemma on which it rests. Cicero is assuming that if intellectual activities are pleasurable, they must be pleasurable in some special non-Epicurean sense that would make virtue and knowledge "intrinsically desirable" in the Platonic or Stoic meaning. But this is precisely what Epicurus does not need to grant. Intellectual activities are pleasurable in exactly the same sense that all pleasures are pleasurable: they are experiences of the living creature that feel good rather than bad. There is nothing in the Epicurean account of pleasure that requires pleasure to be bodily stimulation only – and Torquatus's subsequent responses make exactly this point.

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## Part Two: The Witness Cicero Did Not Mean to Call – The Tusculan Disputations

### Cicero's Student Catches the Contradiction

Before turning to how Torquatus answers the charge in *On Ends* itself, we must note a remarkable episode that occurs in *Tusculan Disputations* – a later work of Cicero's that reveals, in the clearest possible terms, that Cicero knew he was not being fully straight with his readers.

The *Tusculan Disputations* are set as a dialogue between Cicero and a young student, written in approximately 45 BC, shortly after *On Ends*. In the course of that dialogue, the student raises what amounts to an accusation of internal contradiction: Cicero, in *On Ends*, had argued sharply that the Stoics, Academics, and Peripatetics were genuinely different from the Epicureans on the question of what constitutes the highest good – that these were real philosophical differences, not merely verbal disputes about terminology. But in the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero was now treating the Stoics, Academics, and Peripatetics as essentially saying the same thing as each other, with only verbal differences in the way they expressed their positions.

The student's point is not merely about philosophical taxonomy. It strikes at the credibility of Cicero's entire strategy in *On Ends*: if the anti-Epicurean schools are actually all saying the same thing and merely using different words for it, then the elaborate rhetorical machinery of *On Ends* – which treats their positions as genuinely distinct and each as representing a serious challenge to Epicureanism – was itself a kind of advocacy that organized the material for rhetorical effect rather than philosophical truth.

Cicero's response to this challenge in the *Tusculan Disputations* is notably hedged. He does not simply deny the inconsistency; he acknowledges that there is something to the student's observation and attempts to explain the different purposes of the two works. This is itself telling. The crafty old trial lawyer knows he has been caught arguing inconsistent positions to different juries in different courts, and his response is not the denial of an innocent man but the explanation of someone who understands the system he has been working.

### What the Contradiction Reveals

What does this episode tell us about the specific charge against Epicurus – the denial that intellectual pursuits are pleasurable? It tells us that Cicero was willing and able to present the same material in quite different ways depending on the rhetorical purpose of the work at hand. In *On Ends*, where the purpose was to prosecute Epicureanism before a Roman jury, the charge that Epicurus dismissed intellectual pleasures was useful and was deployed. In other contexts, where Cicero was not prosecuting Epicurus, the picture is quite different.

Indeed, in the *Tusculan Disputations* itself, Cicero repeatedly acknowledges that philosophical study – the love of wisdom for what it provides the mind – is one of the greatest sources of satisfaction available to a human being. This is not an Epicurean sentiment that Cicero is endorsing; it is a point on which Cicero himself agrees with the Epicurean position far more than his argument in *On Ends* would suggest. The charge that Epicurus denied the pleasurableness of intellectual pursuits was, in the *Tusculan Disputations* context, not a charge that Cicero was pressing. When he was not arguing to make points against Epicureanism, the point did not seem important enough to press.



## Part Three: Torquatus Answers – On Ends Books I and II

### Absence of Pain Means the Same as Pleasure

Torquatus's response to Cicero's framing in *On Ends* Book I develops the central Epicurean position on pleasure in a way that directly addresses the charge about intellectual pursuits, even when it is not explicitly targeting that charge. The key move is the one that is developed at length in the companion articles on The Norm Is Pleasure Too and The Full Cup Model on the EpicurusToday.com site: the identification of absence of pain with pleasure itself.

Cicero had implied that Epicurus's reduction of pleasure to the removal of pain made the pleasures of intellectual pursuits philosophically invisible – that a framework built on the removal of physical want could not account for the satisfaction of engaging with a great poem, mastering a philosophical argument, or

understanding the history of Rome. Torquatus's response is that this implication completely misunderstands the Epicurean framework.

Epicurus does not reduce pleasure to physical relief. He extends pleasure to cover the entire field of experience that is not painful. The mind in a state of philosophical understanding, engaged with great ideas, free from confusion and fear, is not in pain. It is therefore in pleasure – not as a secondary or derivative condition, but as a primary and genuine example of what pleasure is. The person absorbed in philosophical study who has no awareness of physical want or mental distress is in pleasure. The Epicurean framework does not exclude this; it explains it.

Torquatus makes the point about intellectual pleasures with great directness in *On Ends* Book I, section 55:

> *"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."*[4]

Mental pleasure is not merely equal to bodily pleasure in the Epicurean accounting; it is in certain respects more powerful, because the mind can extend its pleasures through memory and anticipation in ways the body cannot. The pleasure of understanding a philosophical argument is not less real than the pleasure of eating a good meal; it is often more durable and more deeply satisfying. A framework that centers on pleasure as the highest good has no reason to exclude mental pleasures – and Torquatus's speech makes clear that Epicurus never did.

### The Wise Man Is Continually Happy

The passage from *On Ends* Book I, section 62, where Torquatus describes the life of the Epicurean wise man, is among the most important in the entire work for understanding what Epicurus actually taught about intellectual pleasures:

> *"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."*[5]

What is the wise man doing here that constitutes pleasure? He is *remembering* – engaging the mind with the past. He is *aware* of the importance and agreeableness of the present – a mental activity of perception and appreciation. He is *comparing* his life with the fool's – an act of philosophical reflection. He is *finding reasons for joy* – an intellectual exercise. These are all activities of the mind, and they are all identified by Torquatus as sources of the pleasure that constitutes the wise man's continuous happiness. Cicero's charge that Epicurus denied the pleasurableness of mental activity is directly contradicted by the speech Cicero himself wrote for Torquatus.

**Cicero's Persistent Objection in Book Two**

In Book II, when Cicero takes over and subjects Torquatus's position to sustained criticism, his objection about intellectual pleasures recurs but in a revealing form. Cicero's challenge now is not that mental pleasures don't exist but that they cannot be grounded in the Epicurean framework because that framework cannot explain why the pleasures of learning and wisdom are valuable independent of their connection to bodily comfort and ease. This is a philosophically different and more interesting objection than the original charge – but notice what it concedes. By Book II, Cicero is no longer arguing that Epicurus denied that intellectual pursuits are pleasurable. He is arguing that Epicurus cannot adequately account for why they are pleasurable. The original charge has quietly been abandoned.

This retreat is itself revealing. Having set up the charge before Torquatus could respond, Cicero found that the response was more than adequate to dismiss it – because the charge was, as DeWitt would later note, an instance of arguing to make points rather than to reveal truth. Once Torquatus had spoken, the point could no longer be maintained in its original form, and Cicero shifted to a more defensible but also more concessive version.

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## Part Four: What Epicurus Actually Said

### The Pleasure Of Philosophy As Essential To Happiness

The charge that Epicurus denied the pleasurableness of intellectual pursuits is not merely refuted by what Torquatus says in response to it. It is refuted by what Epicurus himself wrote, in texts that Cicero had read and that he either chose to omit or to misrepresent in his framing.

The *Letter to Menoeceus* opens with one of the most direct statements in all of ancient philosophy about the relationship between philosophical study and pleasure:

> *"Let no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul. And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away."*[6] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

Philosophical study is here identified as the path to the health of the soul, and its pursuit at every stage of life is identified as the equivalent of the pursuit of happiness itself. This is not the statement of a philosopher who considered intellectual activity an optional extra or a poor substitute for genuine pleasure. It is the statement of a philosopher who regarded the love of wisdom as among the most direct routes to the pleasured life.

The same Letter contains the famous exhortation: *"Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep."*[7] The study and practice of philosophy – the intellectual activity of understanding, of working through ideas, of building the philosophical framework that frees the mind from irrational fear – is presented here not as a means to pleasure but as itself the activity that constitutes the most stable and reliable form of pleasured living.

Epicurus himself, as reported by Diogenes Laertius, described the nature of pleasure available through philosophy in terms that make the charge of dismissing intellectual pleasures look not merely wrong but absurd:

> *"Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship."*[8] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 27

But Epicurus goes further than philosophical recommendation. In the opening of the *Letter to Herodotus* – his systematic summary of the physical doctrines he most wanted to preserve – he speaks in the first person about where his own happiness comes from:

> *"Wherefore since the method I have described is valuable to all those who are accustomed to the investigation of nature, I who urge upon others the constant occupation in the investigation of nature, and find my own peace chiefly in a life so occupied, have composed for you another epitome on these lines, summing up the first principles of the whole doctrine."*[9] – Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, section 37 (Bailey translation)

"Find my own peace chiefly in a life so occupied."[10] This is Epicurus in the first person, identifying the investigation of nature as the chief source of his own peace – which is a pleasure essential to his own happiness. Not as a theory about what should produce happiness, not as advice he dispenses while personally finding his satisfactions elsewhere, but as a direct statement about where he himself finds what matters most. Later in the same letter he makes the same point as a doctrinal claim for everyone:

> *"Further, we must hold that to arrive at accurate knowledge of the cause of things of most moment is the business of natural science, and that happiness depends on this (viz. on the knowledge of celestial and atmospheric phenomena), and upon knowing what the heavenly bodies really are, and any kindred facts contributing to exact knowledge in this respect."*[11] – Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, section 78 (Bailey translation)[12]

Happiness depends on the study of nature. Together these two passages from the same letter give us the complete picture: Epicurus teaches the investigation of nature because he personally finds his own pleasure of peace chiefly in it, and because he holds that happiness depends on it for everyone who pursues it. The man accused of denying that intellectual pursuits produce genuine pleasure identified the investigation of nature as both the chief source of his own happi-

ness and a general condition for happiness as such. There is no reading of these passages that is compatible with Cicero's charge.

## The Study of Nature as Pleasure

Epicurus's enthusiasm for the study of nature – what the ancients called natural philosophy and we would call natural science – was not merely a theoretical commitment. It was explicitly identified in the Epicurean tradition as one of the highest and most genuine pleasures available to a human being. Understanding how the universe actually works, freeing the mind from the false terror of supernatural explanations of natural phenomena, grasping the real causes of things – these were not neutral activities or philosophical duties. They were pleasures.

As Lucretius opens *De Rerum Natura*:

> *"This terror then, this darkness of the mind, must needs be scattered not by the rays of the sun and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the outer view and the inner law of nature; whose first rule shall take its start for us from this, that nothing is ever begotten of nothing by divine will."*[13] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book I

The study of nature – the investigation that reveals the truth about the universe – is here presented not as an obligation imposed on reluctant students but as the light that dispels the darkness of fear. The person who has understood the nature of things has achieved something that is both true and liberating, and the liberation is itself a part of the highest pleasure. Vatican Saying 41 confirms this directly:[14]

> *"We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."*[15]

Laughing and philosophizing together – the image is of intellectual engagement as something inherently enjoyable, something done alongside the other pleasures of life, not instead of them or in preparation for them.

## Epicurus on Literature and Culture

The specific charge about literature and poetry – that Epicurus dismissed the pleasures of reading and cultural formation – also fails on examination of the

texts. Diogenes Laertius reports that while Epicurus did criticize certain excesses of traditional Greek education as contributing to unnecessary anxiety rather than genuine learning, his criticism was targeted rather than wholesale. He was not dismissing the pleasure of reading; he was arguing that education should be measured by its contribution to the happy life, not pursued as a status display or a form of social competition.

This is a different claim, and an importantly different one. The charge that Epicurus denied that reading gives pleasure is false. The true Epicurean position is that reading, like all activities, should be evaluated by whether it genuinely contributes to a life in which pleasure predominates over pain. Education that produces pretension, competitive anxiety, and the desperate pursuit of intellectual status does not contribute to the happy life. Education that genuinely delights the mind and helps one understand the world and oneself better does. This is not a dismissal of intellectual pleasures; it is an application of the canonical standard to their pursuit.

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## Part Five: The Verdict – Guilty As DeWitt Charged

### The Evidence Cicero Could Not Suppress

The case against Cicero's charge rests, in the end, not primarily on the arguments of modern scholars or even on the texts of Epicurus himself – though both are decisive. It rests on the evidence that Cicero himself could not suppress.

In *On Ends* Book I, Cicero has Torquatus present the Epicurean position in terms that directly contradict the charge Cicero has just made. The wise man's happiness is constituted substantially by mental activities – memory, reflection, comparison, philosophical understanding, the awareness of the agreeableness of the present. These are all intellectual pleasures. The Epicurean position, as Torquatus presents it in Cicero's own dialogue, is that mental pleasures are among the most powerful and durable sources of happiness available to a human being.

In *On Ends* Book II, Cicero himself retreats from the original charge. No longer claiming that Epicurus denied the pleasurableness of intellectual activity, he

shifts to the more modest claim that the Epicurean framework cannot adequately explain why such activity is pleasurable. But this retreat concedes the original point: Epicurus did not deny that intellectual pursuits are pleasurable.

In the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero is caught by his own student in a contradiction that reveals his willingness to present the same material in different forms depending on the rhetorical need of the moment.

And throughout Epicurus's own surviving texts – the letters, the Principal Doctrines, the Vatican Sayings, the fragments – philosophy is presented not as a chore or a means to a pleasure that will arrive later, but as itself among the most immediate and reliable routes to the happy life.

## The Scopes Trial Analogy

Norman DeWitt's comparison of Cicero to William Jennings Bryan at the Scopes trial is, in light of all this, exactly right – and perhaps more generous to Cicero than the evidence warrants. Bryan at the Scopes trial was making bad arguments in defense of a position that was genuinely wrong on the scientific evidence, and the record suggests he did not fully understand what he was arguing against. Cicero, by contrast, understood Epicureanism thoroughly. He had read the texts. He had attended Epicurean lectures. He had written a dialogue in which Torquatus presents the Epicurean position with precision and power. He knew that the charge about intellectual pleasures was false by the standard of the very texts he was arguing against.

DeWitt's verdict bears repeating in full: "I do not believe he could have misrepresented the truth so successfully had he not understood it completely."[16] This is the charge against which Cicero has no defense, precisely because his own writings supply the evidence against him. The man who argued to make points knew which points would make an impression on his jury-like reading audience and which parts of the truth could be safely omitted. The charge that Epicurus dismissed intellectual pleasures made an impression. The passages in which Epicurus celebrated philosophical study as the path to happiness and urged its practice at every age were inconvenient for that impression and were therefore not prominently featured.

### A Different Standard of Deceit

It is worth noting that the deceit involved here is not the crude sort that simply invents things that were never said. Cicero was too careful for that, and the texts of Epicurus were too available for him to risk outright fabrication. The deceit is the more respectable and more dangerous sort that a skilled trial lawyer practices: selecting, arranging, and framing true statements in ways that create false impressions, while omitting or marginalizing the material that would correct those impressions.

The charge that Epicurus dismissed intellectual pleasures rests on real passages in Epicurus's work – his statements about the easy availability of natural goods, his criticisms of certain forms of traditional education, his famous statement that he cannot conceive of good apart from the pleasures of sense. Cicero uses these real passages to construct a false impression by omitting the equally real passages in which Epicurus celebrates philosophical study, urges the practice of philosophy at every age, and describes the wise man's mental pleasures as among the most powerful sources of continuous happiness.

This is the method of the effective advocate, not the method of the honest judge. And DeWitt was right that only someone who understood the case completely could manage the selective presentation so effectively. Cicero's success as an anti-Epicurean debater is a perverse tribute to his knowledge of Epicurus. He knew which doors to close and which to leave open. He knew how to give Torquatus enough of the Epicurean case to seem fair while arranging the dialogue so that the most damaging impressions were created before Torquatus could address them and conceded quietly after he had.

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## Conclusion: What the Case Establishes

The charge that Epicurus denied the pleasurableness of intellectual pursuits was false. It was false by the standard of Epicurus's own surviving texts. It was false by the standard of what Torquatus says in Cicero's own dialogue. It was effectively conceded by Cicero himself in the shift between his Book I framing and his Book II argument. And it was exposed as part of a broader pattern of selective advocacy by the *Tusculan Disputations* episode in which Cicero's own student

caught him in a contradiction between his rhetorical performances in different works.

What this establishes is not that Cicero was incompetent or ignorant. It establishes that he was, as DeWitt said, a crafty trial lawyer pleading before a jury. The jury was the Roman reading public, composed of educated men who identified closely with their literary and cultural formation and who would find the charge that a philosophy dismissed such formation instinctively repugnant. Cicero knew his jury. He knew his case. He knew his opponent's texts. And he argued accordingly.

The appropriate verdict is the one DeWitt delivered: guilty as charged. Not guilty of ignorance – Cicero was far too well-read for that defense. Guilty of pleading to win rather than to illuminate, and of being so effective at it that centuries of readers have accepted the false impression his advocacy created without examining the evidence on which it rested. That evidence – including, most damagingly, the evidence Cicero himself could not suppress in the very work he was using to prosecute his case – tells a different story.

The study of philosophy, of nature, of literature, and of the world was, for Epicurus, among the greatest pleasures available to a human being. He said so clearly, repeatedly, and in terms that Cicero had read. The charge that he said otherwise is the charge of a man who understood his opponent well enough to know exactly where the pressure points were – and who pressed them regardless of what the truth required.



## Key Texts Referenced

- Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*) Books I and II, especially:
  - Book I, near the end (Yonge translation, p. 106): Cicero's charge after Torquatus's speech, on literature, history, and poetry, with the dilemma argument: "Epicurus never asserts this in this manner... if it were once granted that these things were naturally and intrinsically pleasant, then virtue and knowledge would be intrinsically desirable"[17]

- Book I, section 55 (Torquatus on the superiority of mental pleasure)
- Book I, section 62 (the wise man's continuous happiness through mental activity)
- Book II, sections 9–11 (Cicero's retreat to the more modest objection)
- Book II, section 16 (Torquatus on all who are free from pain being in pleasure)


- Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* (the student's challenge about internal contradiction)
- Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, section 37 (Bailey translation): Epicurus's personal statement that he finds his own peace chiefly in the investigation of nature
- Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, section 78 (Bailey translation): "happiness depends on this" – the study of natural science[18]
- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (philosophy as the path to the health of the soul; practice at every age)
- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 27 (friendship as the greatest good provided by wisdom)
- Epicurus, Vatican Saying 41 (laughing and philosophizing together)[19]
- Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book I, opening (the study of nature as liberating pleasure)
- Norman DeWitt, review of Mary N. Porter Packer, *Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics* (Columbia University Press, 1938), in *American Journal of Philology*, 1939
- Mary N. Porter Packer, *Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics* (Columbia University Press, 1938)
- Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1954)


→ *Notes for this article*

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# Two Names, One Reality - Why "Absence of Pain" and "Pleasure" Are Interchangeable Terms in Epicurean Philosophy - and Why This Changes Everything

Among the most contested claims in the history of Western philosophy is a statement Epicurus made that, on its face, seems almost too simple to dispute: that "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul."[1] Generations of commentators have tied themselves in knots over this sentence, accusing Epicurus of verbal trickery, philosophical sleight of hand, or the covert substitution of a Stoic-style asceticism for the genuine pleasure-based ethics he appeared to be offering. The confusion has spawned what can fairly be called a dominant misreading of Epicurus – the view that his highest good was a kind of neutral numbness, a "zero state" of non-suffering that is philosophically respectable precisely because it avoids the vulgar indulgence that "pleasure" seems to imply.

This entire edifice of confusion rests on a single error: the failure to understand that Epicurus was not equating pleasure with a pale shadow of itself or retreating from pleasure toward something less embarrassing. He was making a structural claim about the nature of conscious experience – a claim that, once properly grasped, reveals pleasure to be far broader, more available, and more fully human than any of his critics have been willing to acknowledge. The claim is this: just as the natural universe is divided exhaustively into matter and void, the universe of feeling is divided exhaustively into two and only two conditions, pleasure and pain, between which there is no middle ground. Given this division, "pleasure" and "absence of pain" are not two different things described by different words.

They are two words for the same reality, one stated positively and one stated negatively – exactly as "light" and "absence of darkness" name the same condition of a room.

Understanding this equivalence is not merely a matter of getting Epicurus right on a technical point. It changes the entire picture of what his philosophy is offering, who it is for, how it is lived, and why his ancient opponents fought it with such sustained and revealing fury.

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## I. The Misreading and Its Origins

The dominant modern misreading of Epicurean pleasure can be given a name: the "Zero State." Its adherents hold that when Epicurus identified the highest pleasure with the total absence of pain, he was pointing to a kind of philosophical flatline – a state of non-suffering that is neither painful nor genuinely pleasurable, a "zero state describing a condition where man doesn't need anything." This interpretation has become the majority view among modern commentators for a straightforward reason: it makes Epicurus comfortable for traditions that are made deeply uneasy by pleasure. An Epicurus who counsels the minimization of desire and the cultivation of philosophical calm fits comfortably beside the Stoics, the Platonists, the Christian ascetics, and the Kantian rationalists who have dominated the Western tradition. He can be nodded at, filed away, and treated as a minor variant of philosophies that regard pleasure with suspicion.

The problem is that this portrait is irreconcilable with the intensity of the ancient opposition to Epicurus. Cicero devoted entire books to attacking him. Plutarch wrote treatises of polemic against his school. Epictetus mocked him repeatedly. Lactantius charged him with endangering public morality. These were not the responses of people encountering a fellow ascetic who happened to use different terminology. They were the responses of people who understood perfectly well that Epicurus was saying something genuinely dangerous to the tradition they represented – something that really did elevate pleasure, in the full and recognizable human sense, as the measure of life. The venom of the ancient attacks is itself the most persuasive evidence against the zero-state interpretation. You do not devote a philosophical career to attacking a man for saying that the

avoidance of disturbance is the highest good. You attack a man – ferociously and at length – when he says that pleasure is the alpha and omega of a blessed life and that everyone who is not in pain is already in pleasure.

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## II. The Structural Foundation: Two Conditions, No Middle Ground

To understand the equivalence of pleasure and absence of pain, it is necessary to begin at the logical foundation Epicurus laid. His claim is not that pleasure and absence of pain feel the same, or that they tend to coincide, or that they are closely related. His claim is that conscious experience is exhaustively divided into two and only two categories – pleasure and pain – between which there is no middle ground, no neutral territory, no third state. Given this exhaustive division, the identification of "absence of pain" with "pleasure" is not a rhetorical maneuver. It is a logical necessity.

Diogenes Laertius records the Epicurean position: "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."[2] Torquatus, Cicero's spokesman for Epicurus in *On Ends*, gives the epistemological grounding at 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?"[3]

And at 1.38, with maximum clarity: "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."[4]

The logic is straightforward. If conscious experience is divided into pleasure and pain with nothing between them, then any conscious experience that is not pain is pleasure. The phrase "absence of pain" is therefore not a description of neutral

emptiness. It is another name for pleasure, approached from the opposite direction. This is an identity claim. Absence of pain *is* pleasure – not merely associated with it, not a signal of it, not a condition that tends to generate it – but the same thing, stated negatively rather than positively.

Cicero understood this perfectly and refused to accept it. "But unless you are extraordinarily obstinate," he tells Torquatus, "you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure'" (*On Ends* 2.9).[5] Torquatus is direct: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."[6] Cicero tries again: "Surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?"[7] Torquatus: "Absolutely the same," said he, "indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible" (*On Ends* 2.11).[8] This is not diplomatic exchange. Torquatus is asserting, plainly and without qualification, that these two expressions name one reality – and that this assertion is simply true.

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## III. Why Epicurus Made This Argument: Answering Plato

The zero-state interpretation would be odd enough on purely textual grounds. It becomes entirely indefensible once we understand the historical and philosophical context in which Epicurus made the argument. He was not hedging, minimizing, or retreating. He was answering a specific and powerful challenge that Plato had leveled against pleasure-based ethics.

Plato's argument was this: pleasure cannot be the highest good because pleasure has no natural limit. Pleasure can always be increased; desire is never finally satisfied; there is no point at which the pursuit of pleasure is complete and self-sufficient. A good that admits of indefinite increase cannot be the *telos* – the end and fulfillment of life – because the *telos* must be a state of completion, not an always-receding horizon.

Epicurus answered this with precision. A human life can experience only a finite range of pleasures during its natural span. The capacity of conscious experience – the vessel, as Lucretius describes it – has a natural limit. When that vessel is full

of pleasure and emptied of pain, the limit has been reached. The condition of complete absence of pain is therefore the natural ceiling of pleasure: the state in which the vessel is full. Full cannot be made fuller. This meets Plato's demand for a limit while remaining genuinely, richly pleasurable throughout. Aponia – freedom from bodily pain – and ataraxia – freedom from mental disturbance – are not mystical states requiring Greek to describe. They are the specific conditions that identify the fullness of the vessel: the point at which all available pleasure is present and no pain remains to displace it. They are the Epicurean answer to Plato's challenge – and the answer is: the limit of pleasure is the removal of all pain, which is the same as saying the presence of all pleasure, which is what the full vessel of a pleasurable life is.

Seneca restated the same challenge: "What can be added to that which is perfect? Nothing – otherwise that was not perfect to which something has been added. ... The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect."[9] He used this to argue that Epicurean pleasure cannot be the highest good, since pleasure always admits of increase. The full-vessel model answers directly: when all of life's experienceable pleasures are present and no pain remains, there is nothing left to add. The condition is complete in exactly the sense Seneca demands. It cannot be increased because the vessel is already at capacity.

Once this is clear, the identification of "absence of pain" with the "highest pleasure" ceases to be paradoxical. It is the identification of the *completed* state of pleasure – the full vessel – as the measure of the highest good. And it does not for a moment imply that the contents of that vessel are thin, minimal, or emotionless.

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## IV. "Pleasure" Is Broad – Enormously Broad

This is the point where the full implications of the two-term equivalence become visible. If absence of pain simply is pleasure, and if "pleasure" is the generic term for all conscious experience that falls on the non-painful side of the dividing line, then "pleasure" is an enormously broad category – far broader than the word suggests to readers conditioned by traditions that restrict it to intense bodily stimulation.

Epicurus himself is explicit about this breadth. Diogenes Laertius records: "I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful form."[10] He is not speaking abstractly. He is explicitly including the full range of ordinary sensory pleasures within the meaning of the good. Alongside these, the Epicurean texts consistently include: the pleasures of friendship – described in *Principal Doctrine* 27 as "by far the greatest" good that wisdom provides – intellectual pleasure, philosophical conversation, memory, anticipation, the pleasure of a body at rest and not in pain, and the pleasure of a mind free from irrational fear.

All of these – active and passive, intense and mild, bodily and mental, momentary and extended – fall on the pleasure side of the line. All of them are genuine. None is more "real" than another by virtue of its type. This is not a concession or an afterthought; it is the direct consequence of the two-condition framework. If everything that is not pain is pleasure, then everything that is not pain is pleasure – the entire vast range of human experience that does not hurt.

This breadth also means that the normal, healthy, pain-free experience of being alive – the ordinary ongoing condition of a person going about their day without suffering – is already pleasurable. Not potentially pleasurable once the right stimulation arrives. Already pleasurable, in its ordinary unspecial reality. Norman DeWitt identified this as "the major innovation of the new hedonism": "The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism... 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."[11]

The man pouring wine at a party and the man drinking the wine are both, in Torquatus's formulation, experiencing pleasure – because neither is in pain (*On Ends* 2.16).[12] Cicero presents this as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Torquatus treats it as obvious. It *is* obvious, once the two-condition framework is in place: the man pouring wine is living in pleasure different in character from that of the drinker but no less real, no less present.

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## V. The Feelings Do Not Lie – All Pleasure Is Real

The equivalence of pleasure and absence of pain carries a further implication that runs against much of the scholarship on Epicurus: there is no such thing as "genuine" pleasure as opposed to lesser or illusory pleasure. This language, which appears even in otherwise careful modern discussions of Epicurus, imports a hierarchy that the two-condition framework explicitly refuses.

Pleasure and pain are feelings, and the feelings – like the five senses – report honestly what they are experiencing. Just as a sensation accurately reports what is occurring at the sense organ, a feeling of pleasure accurately reports that the creature is experiencing something congenial to its nature, and a feeling of pain accurately reports that something is working against it. There is no "ungenuine" pleasure, any more than there is an "ungenuine" sensation. All pleasure is real. All pain is real. Error never lies in the feeling itself; it lies in the reasoning about which pleasures to pursue and which to avoid – exactly as error in perception lies not in the sensation but in the mind's hasty judgment about what the sensation means.

*Principal Doctrine* 9 states this with precision: "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."[13] Pleasures differ in intensity, duration, and the part of body or mind they affect – but not in their fundamental character as pleasures. The pleasure of resting after hard work, the pleasure of a good meal, the pleasure of a friend's laughter, the pleasure of a problem solved – these differ greatly in their particulars. They are all, equally and without reservation, pleasures.

Aulus Gellius in *Attic Nights* provides independent confirmation that Epicurus's usage was linguistically grounded: Gellius demonstrates from a range of respected Greek writers that negation of a term conventionally names the extreme point of its opposite, and explicitly includes Epicurus's usage as an instance: "Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain, in these words: 'The utmost height of pleasure is the removal

of all that pains.'"[14] Epicurus's formulation was not a philosophical eccentricity. It followed a recognized linguistic logic.

The correct language for discussing Epicurean pleasures is therefore always comparative and quantitative: greater or lesser pleasure, longer or shorter duration, pleasures that lead to subsequent pain versus those that do not. Never "genuine" versus "lesser." Never "higher" versus "lower." These hierarchical framings – whether Platonic, religious, or otherwise – are foreign to a framework that recognizes only two kinds of feeling and regards all pleasure as equally real.

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## VI. Pleasures Can Be Weighed – Reason Is Essential

None of this means that Epicurus regarded all pleasurable courses of action as equally wise to pursue. The equivalence of pleasure and absence of pain does not dissolve the distinction between good and poor reasoning about which pleasures to seek. On the contrary: precisely because pleasures are real and commensurable – measurable in intensity, duration, and scope – careful reasoning about them is both possible and essential.

Bailey Fragment 62 states the principle directly: "It is better to endure these particular pains so that we may enjoy greater joys. It is well to abstain from these particular pleasures in order that we may not suffer more severe pains."[15] A pleasure that leads to a larger subsequent pain is not worth pursuing. A pain that leads to a larger subsequent pleasure is worth accepting. This is sober hedonic reasoning – neither asceticism nor indulgence, but the intelligent management of what nature has given us as the guide of life.

*Principal Doctrine* 18 adds the crucial epistemological dimension: "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."[16] And *Principal Doctrine* 19: "Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, *by reason*, the limits of pleasure."[17]

The emphasis on reason in both doctrines is not accidental. The recognition that absence of pain is already the highest pleasure – that the ordinary conscious life of a person living without suffering is already a pleasurable life – is not automatic. It requires the philosophical work of understanding one's own experience honestly, of rejecting the false frameworks that generate unnecessary suffering, and of developing the practical wisdom to navigate the choices between greater and lesser pleasures and pains that constitute the intelligent Epicurean life. As DeWitt summarizes from Epicurus: "The stable condition of well-being in the flesh and the confident hope of its continuance means the most exquisite and infallible of joys for those who are capable of figuring the problem out."[18]

Epicurus's philosophy is necessary not because pleasure is difficult to find, but because the false beliefs that obscure it – the fear of divine punishment, the dread of death, the anxious pursuit of vain desires that can never be satisfied – are powerful distortions that require sustained philosophical work to dissolve. The gate must be burst by effort and understanding. What is on the other side, once the gate is open, is what was always there.

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## VII. The Wise Epicurean Is Always Happy – And Why This Follows

The claim that the wise Epicurean is *continuously* happy – not occasionally happy, not happy under favorable circumstances, but always in a condition where pleasure predominates over pain – follows directly from the two-term equivalence and the breadth of pleasure it implies.

Torquatus gives the fullest account (*On Ends* 1.62):[19]

> "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... And

> pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation."[20]

Three resources make continuous happiness possible. First, the wise person has eliminated the largest sources of unnecessary pain through understanding: the irrational fear of the gods, the irrational fear of death, and the restless anxiety of vain desires that can never be satisfied. These pains arise not from actual circumstances but from false beliefs. Remove the false beliefs, and the portion of experience that was being consumed by unnecessary suffering becomes available for pleasure. Second, the pleasures of memory and anticipation are genuine present pleasures. "We are elated by the blessings to which we look forward" and "we delight in those which we call to memory" (*On Ends* 1.56-57).[21] The Epicurean who is not receiving intense present stimulation is not in a neutral zone. He is in the genuine present pleasure of grateful memory and confident anticipation. Third, pleasures and pains are commensurable and can offset one another. Mental pleasures can outweigh bodily pains.

The last of these is demonstrated in one of the most powerful passages in the Epicurean literature: Epicurus's own final letter to Idomeneus, written on his deathbed while suffering from severe kidney and stomach disease. "On this truly happy day of my life, as I am at the point of death, I write this to you. The disease in my bladder and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their natural severity: but against all this is the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you."[22] The bodily pain was real. The mental pleasure was equally real – fully and genuinely pleasurable in the Epicurean sense. For Epicurus, the pleasures exceeded the pains in the full accounting of his experience. He was happy. Not through denial, not through Stoic suppression, but through the genuine preponderance of pleasure over pain that his philosophy had equipped him to achieve even in the most extreme circumstances.

Lucretius confirms the same mechanism (*De Rerum Natura* 3.98): "Thus often the body, which is clear to see, is sick, when, all the same we feel pleasure in some other hidden part."[23] Pleasures and pains are multiple, simultaneous, capable of being weighed across the whole of experience. Continuous happiness does not require the complete absence of all pain at all times. It requires only that pleasures predominate in the full accounting – and for the person who has done the

philosophical work of removing unnecessary suffering, this is achievable in nearly any circumstances.

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## VIII. Why the Equivalence Has Been Denied – The Stakes

The two-term equivalence – pleasure equals absence of pain, absence of pain equals pleasure, the terms are interchangeable names for the same reality – has been denied, minimized, and explained away for two thousand years. It is worth being direct about why.

The equivalence is dangerous to every tradition that grounds its authority on the natural insufficiency of human life. If absence of pain simply is pleasure – if the normal, healthy, conscious experience of a life not consumed by suffering is already, as such, a pleasurable life – then the entire apparatus of moral and religious authority that depends on the premise that unaided nature is inadequate loses its footing. You do not need a priest to fill a cup that is already full of pleasure by the mere fact of being lived without pain. You do not need a Stoic sage to guide you toward the virtue that supposedly alone constitutes the good. You do not need divine grace to supplement a natural condition that is, as it stands and without addition, already the highest achievable good.

This is why Cicero – personally acquainted with committed Epicureans of the highest caliber, including Cassius, Atticus, and Torquatus himself – nevertheless devoted sustained effort to misrepresenting the philosophy. It is why Plutarch argued at length against a position he willfully failed to state accurately. It is why Lactantius found Epicurus dangerous to public morality. The danger was not the asceticism the zero-state reading projects onto him. The danger was the opposite: the liberating recognition that nature, through the honest testimony of pleasure and pain, has already provided every human being with everything needed to recognize and pursue a genuinely happy life – without the mediation of any authority that claims to stand between the individual and nature's guidance.

The dominant modern zero-state reading is the latest iteration of the same gatekeeping tradition. It makes Epicurus safe by making him thin – by reducing the

richness of his account of pleasure to a minimalist philosophical whisper that offends no one and changes nothing. The actual Epicurus, whose philosophy took Italy "as if by storm" in Cicero's own phrase, was doing something far more radical.

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## IX. What Changes When the Equivalence Is Accepted

When the equivalence of pleasure and absence of pain is genuinely accepted – not as a curiosity about Epicurean terminology but as the structural claim it actually is – the entire picture of Epicurean ethics is transformed.

Pleasure is not a rare achievement or a peak state reserved for moments of intense stimulation. It is the normal condition of a conscious creature living without active suffering. The ordinary human being going through an ordinary day – not in crisis, not in pain, doing normal things in the company of people they care about – is living in pleasure. This is not a consolation prize. It is the genuine full reality of the pleasurable life that Epicurus identified as the highest achievable good. It is available not only to philosophers, but to anyone willing to think clearly about what they are actually experiencing and to remove the false beliefs that drain it of its natural content.

The goal of the Epicurean philosophical life is therefore not primarily to *add* pleasure from some external source to an otherwise neutral existence. It is to recognize the pleasure that is already the natural condition of a healthy life – to remove the false beliefs that generate unnecessary suffering, to cultivate the wisdom to navigate the genuine choices between greater and lesser pleasures and pains, and to develop the resources of friendship, memory, understanding, and clear perception of the natural world that make the predominance of pleasure over pain robust and sustainable in nearly any circumstances.

Two terms. One reality. And the reality is this: the conscious life of a natural creature, lived without the pains that arise from false belief and vain desire, is already – right now, as it is – the highest pleasurable good available. That is what Epicurus taught. That is what Torquatus defended against Cicero's most strenu-

ous objections. That is what the ancient opponents understood perfectly well, which is why they fought so hard to ensure that the gate would stay closed.

Burst the gate, and what you find on the other side is not philosophical minimalism. It is the full richness of a human life seen clearly, understood honestly, and lived in the knowledge that nature has already given us, in the two honest feelings of pleasure and pain, everything we need to know how to live it well.

→ *Notes for this article*

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

*"For this reason we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."*[1] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

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## The Claim and Why It Matters

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

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

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

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

- Epicurus taught that Nature has given every living creature exactly **two internal feelings**: pleasure and pain.
- These two are **exhaustive and mutually exclusive** — there is no third state between them.
- **If pain is absent, pleasure is present** — not by convention or definition, but because there are only two options and one of them is gone.
- "Absence of pain" and "presence of pleasure" are therefore **two ways of describing the same condition**, not two different things.[2]

  *"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."*[3] – Diogenes Laertius, Book X, 34

  *"Surely anyone who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain."*[4] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* 1.38

  *"I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too."*[5] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* 2.16

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

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

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

> *"When we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality... but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind."*[6] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

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

- **The letter opens** by stating that philosophy leads to **happiness** — not tranquility, not absence of pain, but happiness.
- **The letter explicitly declares** that "pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life" and "the first good innate in us."[7]
- **The contested passage** is not Epicurus saying "I don't mean pleasure; I mean absence of pain." It is Epicurus clarifying that "pleasure" in his usage is broader than physical stimulation of the body — it **includes** freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance as genuine pleasures, not as replacements for pleasure.
- **The letter closes** with the vision of the wise man living "like a god among men" — a life of **full positive pleasure**, not minimal disturbance.[8]

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

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

Principal Doctrine 3 states:[9]

> *"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."*[10]

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

- **PD3 is the third in a deliberate sequence of responses** to the three most powerful ancient arguments used to attack pleasure as the goal of life:
  - **PD1** answers the argument from divine punishment: a truly blessed being has no interest in rewarding or punishing humans.[11]
  - **PD2** answers the argument from fear of death: death is the end of all sensation, so neither good nor evil follows it.[12]
  - **PD3 and PD4** answer the argument from Plato's *Philebus*: that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it has no limit and therefore can never be complete.
- **Plato's challenge** was: pleasure can always be increased; it is never finished; a thing that cannot be completed cannot be the highest good.
- **Epicurus's answer** (PD3): pleasure *does* have a limit — the limit is reached when all pain is removed, because at that point there is no more pain to displace. The cup is full. What Plato said could never be complete is in fact complete.
- **What PD3 is *not* doing:** It is not saying that the content of a good life is merely the absence of pain. It is establishing that the *measure of fullness* — the philosophical limit that answers Plato — is the removal of pain. The content of the full life remains what Epicurus stated throughout all his writings: the pleasures of taste, hearing, sight, friendship, philosophy, memory, and anticipation.

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

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

There is no ambiguity about this:

> *"I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful form."*[13] – Epicurus, in Diogenes Laertius, Book X

> *"For my part I find no meaning which I can attach to what is termed good, if I take away from it the pleasures obtained by taste, if I take away the pleasures which come from listening to music, if I take away too the charm derived by the eyes from the sight of figures in movement, or other pleasures by any of the senses in the whole man."*[14] – Epicurus, as quoted by Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*

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

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

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

- **Torquatus** (Cicero's Epicurean spokesman): *"Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?"*[15]
- **Diogenes of Oinoanda** (carved in stone for all passersby): *"I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the* ***fullness of pleasure****."*[16]
- **Cicero** (a hostile critic, which makes his testimony all the more telling): *"[The Epicureans said] that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures"* — the Latin is unambiguous: *plena et conferta voluptatibus*, a life **full and crammed** with pleasures.[17]
- **Torquatus** again: *"The wise man is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains."*[18]

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

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## Argument 6: The Ancient World Already Had a Name for "Absence of Pain" as the Goal — and It Was Not "Epicurean"

The historical record on this point is clear enough that it cannot be explained away as a matter of interpretation.

The ancient philosophical world was perfectly aware that someone had proposed "absence of pain" — freedom from all annoyance — as the ultimate goal of life.

They did not attribute this position to Epicurus. They attributed it to **Hieronymus of Rhodes**, a Peripatetic philosopher who lived approximately 290–230 BC, after Epicurus, and who had Epicurus's works available to him when he formulated his own position.

The ancient sources are explicit. Clement of Alexandria, in his Stromateis (Book II, Chapter 21, sections 127–128), records the ancient division of philosophical schools by their stated goals, explicitly placing Epicurus in the category of those who proposed pleasure as the end, and Hieronymus of Rhodes in the separate category of those who proposed absence of pain as the end. Cicero reports the same division independently in multiple works. In *Academic Questions*, he states it directly:

> *"Hieronymus placed it [the chief good] in being free from all annoyance."*[19]

And in *On Ends*, Cicero stages a direct debate in which Hieronymus is explicitly named as the philosopher who held that "freedom from pain" and "pleasure" are two different things — and that "freedom from pain" is the true chief good — while Torquatus, the Epicurean spokesman, argues that pleasure is the goal and that freedom from pain is simply another name for the same condition, not a separate or superior alternative.

Several points follow from this with force:

- **Epicurus and Hieronymus are listed as distinct positions by the ancient sources.** No ancient commentator collapses them. The difference between "pleasure is the goal" and "absence of pain is the goal" was understood in antiquity as the difference between two different philosophers holding two genuinely different views — not as two formulations of the same philosophy.
- **Hieronymus came after Epicurus and chose deliberately to differ.** He had access to Epicurus's texts. He was not confused about what Epicurus taught. He disagreed — and the ancient world recorded the disagreement as a matter of philosophical fact.
- **Epicurus would have been fully aware of the "absence of pain" option and chose not to adopt it.** The position was available to him. He defined pleasure — not mere freedom from pain — as the goal, the beginning, and

the end of the blessed life. This was not an oversight; it was a deliberate choice between two positions that the ancient world clearly distinguished.

- **The person who today attributes "absence of pain" to Epicurus is not reporting Epicurean philosophy.** They are reporting Hieronymian philosophy and attaching Epicurus's name to it in error. The ancient world would have recognized this immediately — not because the texts are ambiguous, but because the distinction between the two positions was the kind of thing that philosophers in antiquity took pains to establish and record precisely.

The practical implication is direct: if you maintain that "absence of pain" rather than pleasure is the true goal of life, you are not an Epicurean. You are a Hieronymian. The irony is precise: Hieronymus of Rhodes deliberately rejected Epicurus's position — pleasure as the goal — and substituted his own: absence of pain. That substitution is what the ancient world recorded and attributed to Hieronymus. Today, Hieronymus is forgotten and Epicurus's name endures — but the "absence of pain" position that Hieronymus invented as a departure from Epicurus has been wrongly reattached to Epicurus himself. Epicurus has been tagged with his own successor's rejection of his own teaching. The confusion should be corrected wherever it appears.



## Argument 7: The Friendship Argument — Why "Minimize Pain" Cannot Be the Prime Directive

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

- Deep friendship is one of the greatest pleasures Epicurus identified.
- Deep friendship inevitably ends in grief for one of the parties — grief that is among the sharpest pains available to human experience.
- A person whose goal was *primarily to minimize pain* would rationally avoid deep friendship, moderate every attachment, guard against every commitment that might later hurt.

- The Epicurean does the opposite — pursues friendship **gladly, deliberately, and without reservation** — because the pleasures of shared life, mutual support, and being truly known vastly outweigh the cost of eventual grief.
- The pain of grief is accepted willingly as the price of the pleasure that made it possible.

**The conclusion:** If "absence of pain" were the prime directive, Epicurus would counsel against deep friendship. He counseled the opposite — saying that "of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship."[20] The Epicurean goal must be stated as the **maximum of pleasure**, not the minimum of pain. These are not the same thing, and the difference shapes every practical choice.

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## Argument 8: "The Goal of Life Is Absence of Pain" as a Standalone Phrase Is Liable to Systematic Misinterpretation

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

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

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## Argument 9: The "Limit" Is Not the Goal — The Full Cup Model

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

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

> *"[T]he Epicureans said that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures."*[21] – Cicero, *In Defense of Publius Sestius* 10.23

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

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## Argument 10: The Three Distorting Traditions That Produced This Reading

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

- **The Stoic filter:** Stoics found it useful to read Epicurus as a failed Stoic — someone whose *ataraxia* was essentially Stoic *apatheia* in different language.

Domesticating Epicurus as a philosopher of tranquility served the Stoic agenda.

- **The religious filter:** For traditions that regard pleasure as morally suspect, reading Epicurus as a philosopher of inner peace (rather than pleasure) makes him theologically more comfortable. The cost is misreading him.
- **The Humanist filter:** Modern Humanism's emphasis on rational self-restraint and the subordination of appetite to principle makes the "tranquility" reading of Epicurus more acceptable than his actual teaching. Again, comfort is purchased at the price of accuracy.

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

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## Argument 11: The Historical Record of Epicurean Lives Contradicts the Ascetic Picture Entirely

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

**Epicurus's own life and property:** - At his death, Epicurus held extensive property — the Garden, his house inside the walls of Athens, and other holdings — and bequeathed them formally by will to continue the school's work. - The Garden was not a remote rural hermitage. It stood on the **Dromos**, the most traveled ceremonial thoroughfare in Athens — the main road from the Dipylon Gate to Plato's Academy, thirty-nine meters wide in places, used for the great Panathenaic procession and by travelers, merchants, diplomats, and students daily. Epicurus was not hiding. He was on the main road. - At the gate of the Garden, Epicurus posted an explicit public welcome: *"Hospes hic bene manebis, hic summum bonum voluptas est"* — **"Dear Guest, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure."**[22] He advertised the philosophy on

one of the busiest roads in the ancient world and invited every passerby in. - Epicurus maintained correspondence with friends and followers across the entire Greek world — not a small isolated community but an extensive network. - He hosted regular meals and dinners, enjoyed wine, engaged in philosophical conversation as a positive pleasure, and is documented as owning slaves and managing the substantial finances of a large and active school. - Not a single ancient source describes Epicurus as ascetic, minimalistic, or withdrawn from the city and its life. The description of a recluse in a sealed private retreat is, as the evidence establishes, a fiction.

**No Epicurean leader of the ancient world is famed for asceticism:** - Metrodorus, Hermarchus, Colotes, and the other early Epicurean leaders were active, engaged participants in philosophical debate — writing polemical works, corresponding with opponents, building institutions. - **Philodemus** (1st century BC) lived and worked in the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum — one of the grandest private estates in the Roman world — as the philosophical associate of **Lucius Calpurnius Piso**, the father-in-law of Julius Caesar and a man of enormous wealth and political influence. A philosopher whose goal was "absence of pain" in the minimalist sense would not be living in a villa of extraordinary luxury surrounded by one of the largest private libraries of antiquity. Philodemus also wrote prolifically — dozens of surviving works — precisely to bring Epicurean philosophy to the educated Roman public. - **Diogenes of Oinoanda** (2nd century AD) spent his personal fortune commissioning a **massive stone inscription** — covering the entire wall of a public stoa in his city — so that every passerby could read the Epicurean philosophy for free. He states his reason explicitly: he wanted to spread the benefits of philosophy as widely as possible before his death. This is the action of a man who understood his goal as the active promotion of the fullest possible pleasurable life for others — not of a man who thought the goal was passive withdrawal. - **Torquatus** and **Cassius Longinus**, the most prominent Roman Epicureans of the late Republic, were men of the first political and military rank. Cassius organized the conspiracy against Caesar from Epicurean philosophical conviction. Neither resembles an ascetic minimalist by any stretch.

**Epicurean leaders actively recruited outsiders:** - Epicurus himself wrote extensively and distributed his works to friends and strangers across the Greek

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

**Epicurean sympathies in the courts of the powerful:** - **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, the Seleucid king whose court had Epicurean sympathies, established a Gymnasium in Jerusalem — the institutional center of Hellenistic philosophical culture — not a monastery. - **Empress Pompeia Plotina**, wife of Trajan and one of the most powerful women in Rome, was a documented and devoted Epicurean. Her personal letter to Hadrian begins: *"How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord."*[23] She intervened successfully to change Roman law governing the Epicurean school's succession in Athens. Upon her death, Hadrian deified her and built temples in her honor. The Epicurean school's most prominent imperial patron was a woman at the center of Roman power — not a recluse.

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

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

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## Summary: What the Texts Actually Say

| Claim | What the Texts Say |
|---|---|
| The goal is "absence of pain" | *"Pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life."* — *Letter to Menoeceus* |
| The goal is tranquility/ataraxia | *"Pleasure is the end of the best mode of life."* — Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 32 |
| PD3 defines the Epicurean goal | PD3 answers Plato's "no limits" argument; it does not summarize Epicurean ethics |
| The wise man seeks minimal stimulation | *"Numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind."* — Torquatus |
| "Absence of pain" and "pleasure" are different things | *"Surely anyone conscious of his condition must be either in pleasure or in pain."* — Torquatus |
| Epicurus couldn't conceive the good without active pleasure | *"I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing."* — Epicurus |
| "Absence of pain" as the goal is Epicurean philosophy | Ancient sources list this as the position of Hieronymus of Rhodes, not Epicurus — explicitly distinguished from Epicurus's goal of pleasure |
| Epicurean leaders lived ascetically and withdrew from society | Epicurus posted a public welcome on Athens's busiest road; Philodemus lived in a Roman villa; Diogenes spent a fortune on |

| Claim | What the Texts Say |
|---|---|
| | public outreach; Pompeia Plotina was at the center of imperial power |

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## Conclusion

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

1. It violates the two-feelings doctrine — absence of pain simply *is* pleasure.
2. It reads a single clause of the *Letter to Menoeceus* against the plain meaning of the whole letter.
3. It treats PD3 as a summary of Epicurean ethics when it is a targeted response to a specific philosophical opponent.
4. It contradicts Epicurus's own explicit statements about what he could not conceive the good without.
5. It is flatly contradicted by every ancient witness, friendly and hostile alike.
6. It attributes to Epicurus the position that ancient philosophy explicitly assigned to Hieronymus of Rhodes — a different philosopher whose explicitly different conclusion the ancient world noted and recorded with precision.
7. It produces practical counsel (minimize attachments, avoid risk of grief) that Epicurus explicitly rejected.
8. It misleads general audiences by suggesting something like Buddhist or Stoic detachment — the precise opposite of what Epicurus taught.
9. It is refuted by the historical record of how actual Epicurean leaders lived — on the main roads of Athens, in Roman villas, at imperial courts, actively recruiting outsiders, maintaining extensive friendships, and spending personal fortunes to spread the philosophy as widely as possible.

The Epicurean goal is **a life full of positive pleasure** — crammed full, as the ancient testimony puts it — pursued wisely so that the pleasures are real, lasting, and uncontaminated by the greater pains that foolish pursuit would bring. Absence of pain describes the same state from the negative side, because where pain

ends, pleasure begins — but this logical equivalence should never be mistaken for an endorsement of the *empty* cup over the *full* one.

The goal is fullness. Not emptiness.

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## Key Texts Referenced

- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Diogenes Laertius 10.128–132): the primary statement that pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life[24]
- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 1–4 (Diogenes Laertius, Bailey translation): the four-doctrine sequence responding to divine punishment, fear of death, and Plato's limits argument
- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Books 1–2: the fullest ancient positive account, including the two-feelings doctrine and the imagination test
- Diogenes Laertius, Book X, 34: the two internal sensations, pleasure and pain
- Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragments 3, 29, 32 (M.F. Smith translation): the anthem to the fullness of pleasure; pleasure as the end of the best mode of life
- Cicero, *In Defense of Publius Sestius* 10.23: *plena et conferta voluptatibus* — a life crammed full of pleasures
- Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* Book II, Chapter 21, sections 127–128: the ancient division of philosophical schools by their stated goals, explicitly separating Epicurus (pleasure) from Hieronymus of Rhodes (absence of pain)
- Cicero, *Academic Questions* (*Academica*): "Hieronymus placed it [the chief good] in being free from all annoyance" — explicitly distinguishing Hieronymus's position from Epicurus's[25]
- Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Book 2: the staged debate naming Hieronymus of Rhodes as the philosopher who held "absence of pain" as the chief good, distinct from Epicurus's goal of pleasure
- Frances Wright, *A Few Days In Athens*, Chapter 10: the friendship argument against minimizing pain as the prime directive

- Don Boozer, "Where Was the Garden of Epicurus? The Evidence from the Ancient Sources and Archaeology": the Garden's location on the Dromos, the welcome sign, and the property evidence
- Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* XXI: the welcome inscription at the Garden gate
- Cicero, *De Finibus* 5.1–3: the Garden on the route from the Dipylon Gate to the Academy
- Pompeia Plotina correspondence with Hadrian (AD 121), preserved in Athens inscription: "How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord"[26]
- Companion articles: "The Full Cup Model: Pleasure, Purity, and the Limit That Answers Plato"; "The Norm Is Pleasure Too"; "Ataraxia Is Desirable But Not The Ultimate Goal"; "In the Arena: The Locations of the Garden and House of Epicurus Refute the Recluse Myth"; "Epicurus and the Jews: Conflict and Opposition," EpicurusToday.com

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Too Long Unpraised And Unappreciated - Aulus Gellius And The Clearest Ancient Testimony That Absence of Pain Means Nothing More Than Pleasure

> "The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures."[1] – Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 3[2]

Centuries of commentators have treated this and similar statements as an invitation to make something other than pleasure the real goal of Epicurean philosophy – a neutral resting state, a merely negative condition, a "tranquility" or "static pleasure" standing above and apart from pleasure as ordinarily understood. The clearest evidence against that reading does not come from an Epicurean apologist. It comes from a Roman grammarian with no stake whatsoever in Epicurean ethics, writing roughly four and a half centuries after Epicurus's death, in the middle of a technical argument about a poet's word choice. Aulus Gellius, in Book Two, chapter six of his *Attic Nights*, quotes Epicurus's own definition of pleasure as one example among several of a single, well-understood rhetorical and logical principle: that the total negation of a bad thing is not a weak, middling, or merely empty condition, but the strongest possible affirmation of the good thing that is its opposite. Applied to Epicurus, that principle admits only one reading. "Absence of all pain" does not gesture toward something other than pleasure. It names pleasure, at its highest possible degree.

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## Who Was Aulus Gellius?

Aulus Gellius (c. 125 – after 180 AD) was a Roman author on general topics, not a philosopher of any school. According to Wikipedia's entry on Gellius, he studied rhetoric in Rome under Titus Castricius and Sulpicius Apollinaris and philosophy under the Platonist Calvisius Taurus, and he "enjoyed also the friendship and instruction of Favorinus, Herodes Atticus, and Fronto." Out of his reading and note-taking, much of it begun during time spent in Attica, he compiled the *Attic Nights* (*Noctes Atticae*), a twenty-book collection covering grammar, law, history, philosophy, and other issues, arranged with no system other than the order in which he happened to make his notes.

That lack of system is exactly what makes Gellius valuable here. He is not writing to defend or attack any ethical school. In Book Two, chapter six, he is defending the poet Virgil against grammarians who had criticized three of Virgil's word choices in the *Aeneid* and *Georgics* as careless or too weak for their subject matter. Epicurus enters the chapter only because his definition of pleasure happens to be a convenient, well-known illustration of the same rhetorical technique Gellius is defending in Virgil. Gellius has no reason to bias his analysis in any direction. He is settling a vocabulary and rhetorical dispute, and Epicurus's own words are simply evidence, cited in passing, the way a grammarian cites Homer or Cicero for good writing style.

## The Dispute Gellius Is Settling

Gellius's own chapter heading states his subject directly: "On some words which Virgil is asserted to have used carelessly and negligently; and the answer to be made to those who bring this false charge."[3] Gellius takes up three separate criticisms in turn.

The first criticism concerns the word *vexasse*, used of Scylla "battering" Ulysses' ships (*Eclogues* 6). Critics called it too mild a word for a monster tearing sailors apart. Gellius traces the root of the word to *vehere* ("to carry off by force") and shows through parallel usage in Cato and Cicero that it in fact carries a strong, violent sense. The third concerns *squalentem*, describing a tunic "rough" with

gold (*Aeneid* 10). Gellius shows the word properly describes a dense, scale-like overlay, not filth, and so is entirely apt for gold armor.

It is the second criticism that matters for our purposes. Virgil, in the *Georgics* (III.4-5), calls the mythical Egyptian king Busiris – who murdered every foreign guest who came to his shores – *inlaudati*, "the unpraised." The critics objected that this was far too weak a word. A man who ritually slaughtered his guests deserved to be called monstrous, execrable, accursed – not merely "unpraised," as though his only fault were an unremarkable one.

## Total Negation Is Total Affirmation

Gellius's answer to this objection is the heart of the chapter, and it rests on a single logical observation. Almost no one, however base, goes through life without saying or doing at least one thing that could be called praiseworthy. Therefore, Gellius says, sayings arise such as the old proverb that "oft-times even a fool expresses himself to the purpose."[4] It is almost always possible to find reason to praise something, in however small a degree.

It follows that to describe a man as *inlaudatus* – praiseworthy in nothing, at any time, in any respect, without a single exception – is not describing someone mild or lackluster. The phrase is describing the total absence of a nearly universal quality, and total absence of a nearly universal good quality is not a lack in some minor degree; it is the extreme of the corresponding vice. Gellius states the logic explicitly: freedom from every fault (*inculpatus*) simply *is* the same thing as perfect goodness – not a weaker, adjacent, or different condition, but the very definition of it. By the same reasoning applied in reverse, *inlaudatus*, complete and total absence of praise, is the very definition of the extreme of wickedness.

Gellius then shows this is not an isolated grammatical usage but a recognized technique, citing Homer as its most famous practitioner: "Homer usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults."[5] When Homer writes that the Greeks charged "not unwillingly," he is not reporting a modest, lukewarm willingness – he means they charged with the utmost eagerness. When he writes that Agamemnon was seen "not confused, inactive, nor yet loath to fight," he is not describing a merely adequate composure – he means the king was the very picture of readiness and courage.[6] In each case, the total nega-

tion of a fault expresses, without exception, the maximum degree of the corresponding virtue. Nothing is held back in reserve, and nothing separate or lesser is being described. The negative statement and the positive superlative are two ways of naming one and the same condition.

## Epicurus's Own Words, As Gellius Records Them

Having established the principle through *inculpatus* and through Homer, Gellius adds a third instance, presented as simply one more example of the same well-known device:

> "Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain, in these words: 'The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of all that pains.'"[7]

Gellius places this sentence in exactly the same logical category as the examples that precede it. He is not reporting that Epicurus identified some third, intermediate, or merely negative condition standing apart from pleasure. He is reporting that Epicurus used the identical rhetorical structure Homer used for courage and the Latin language used for goodness: total negation of the bad thing (pain), applied without exception or remainder, expresses the maximum possible degree of the good thing (pleasure) – not a different thing, and not a lesser one. "The utmost height of pleasure" is Gellius's own phrase for what Epicurus meant, stated as plainly as can be. Gellius's claim closely tracks what survives independently as Epicurus's own Principal Doctrine 3, that "the removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures."[8] The same meaning is confirmed through an entirely separate and neutral source.

## A Fourth Confirming Example

Gellius is not finished. He immediately adds a fourth instance of the same device, this time returning to Virgil: "Again Virgil on the same principle called the Stygian pool 'unlovely'" (*Georgics* IV.479).[9] Just as *inlaudatus* expresses the extreme of wickedness by denying praise, and Epicurus's formula expresses the height of pleasure by denying pain, so Virgil's "unlovely" expresses the extreme of ugliness and repulsiveness by denying that anything about the infernal pool could be loved. Gellius states the parallel explicitly: "For just as he expressed ab-

horrence of the 'unpraised' man by the denial of praise, so he abhorred the 'unlovable' by the denial of love."[10] This gives us four examples – Homer twice, Latin usage generally, and Epicurus – that are treated by Gellius as instances of one and the same, entirely uncontroversial and un-mysterious, rule of language and logic.

## Why Gellius's Testimony Matters

Gellius has no philosophical investment in Epicurean ethics one way or the other. He is not defending Epicurus against Stoic or Academic critics, and he is not championing pleasure as a way of life. He cites Epicurus's definition of pleasure the same way he cites a line of Homer: as a convenient, well-known example of a grammatical and rhetorical pattern that any educated reader of his day would recognize on sight. That is exactly what makes this testimony so valuable. It shows that in the second century AD, among the literate Roman public Gellius wrote for, Epicurus's formula "the removal of all pain is the height of pleasure" was understood as a straightforward instance of a common figure of speech – not as a piece of specialized doctrine requiring philosophical training to understand, and certainly not as a formula that pointed toward some separate, non-sensory, or merely tranquil condition distinct from pleasure.[11] The plain, unforced, contemporary reading of Epicurus's words was total identity: complete absence of pain simply *is* pleasure, carried to its highest possible degree.

## Confirmed by Epicurus's Own Spokesman: Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends

Gellius's testimony does not stand alone. Cicero's *On Ends* preserves an extended exchange in which Torquatus, the dialogue's Epicurean spokesman, defends exactly the same identity between pleasure and absence of pain under repeated, hostile questioning from Cicero himself.

Torquatus first states the position in 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."[12]

This is the same claim Gellius records, stated in the same terms: no middle state, and the removal of pain named directly as the highest pleasure, a ceiling that cannot be exceeded.

In Book Two, Cicero takes up the argument to attack it, and returns to this single point three separate times. First, in section 9, he demands that Torquatus concede a distinction between the two terms:

> 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.'"[13] Torquatus: **"Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."**[14]

Two sections later, in 11, Cicero tries again, granting Torquatus everything he can and asking only for the narrower point:

> 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?"[15] Torquatus: **"Absolutely the same," said he, "indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible."** (*Plane idem, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest.* Cic. *Fin.* 2.11)[16]

Cicero returns a third time in section 16, now arguing from ordinary usage – that everyday language recognizes a third, intermediate condition, neither pleasure nor pain, and that Torquatus is doing violence to that usage by denying it exists:

> "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... Do you not see a vast multitude of men

> who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions?"[17]
>
> **"No, indeed," said he; "I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too."**[18]

Three separate attempts, from three separate directions – a direct demand for concession, a narrower fallback position, and an appeal to ordinary usage. Torquatus vigorously defends the position and gives the same answer every time. Absence of pain is not *similar to* pleasure, not *a step toward* pleasure, not *related to* pleasure, not *better than* pleasure. It **is** pleasure, and the greatest degree of it, a ceiling that leaves nothing further to be added.

These two witnesses could hardly be more different in their relationship to Epicurean philosophy. One was a grammarian with no stake in the ethical debate at all. The other was an ardent defender of Epicurus, insisting on the same identity through three rounds of hostile questioning from Rome's greatest orator. They arrive at the identical conclusion: the term absence of pain does not describe anything other than pleasure itself. **It is exactly pleasure**, at the greatest degree pleasure can possibly reach.

When even a neutral third party talking through a grammar exercise can clearly understand Epicurus as advocating pleasure rather than something else, can we who seek to understand and apply Epicurus's philosophy do less?

→ *Notes for this article*

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# You Already Understand That Fearlessness Refers To Courageous Bodily and Mental Actions - Why Don't You Realize That Painlessness Refers To Bodily And Mental Pleasures?

What does it mean to call a man "fearless"? Nobody hears that word and pictures a coward, or a weakling, or someone who merely manages to get through the day without flinching too badly. "Fearless" states the opposite: the total absence of fear names the very summit of courage and boldness – so much courage that not a trace of fear survives it. A "fearless" man is not a little bit brave. He is the bravest kind of man there is - and he is **taking action** that illustrates and justifies the label of brave.

English performs this same function constantly, and it is worth considering a few more examples before going further, because once the pattern is seen it cannot be unseen. A "flawless" performance is not a mediocre one with no glaring defects – it is the single best performance imaginable, perfection itself. A "tireless" worker is not someone doing the bare minimum – it is someone whose energy is inexhaustible, the very picture of vigor. An "effortless" catch is not a weak or lazy play – it is the most skilled version of the skill there is, executed so well it looks like nothing at all. A "peerless" champion is not a mediocre one – it is the greatest one who has ever lived, so far ahead of all rivals that none can be compared to him. A "priceless" heirloom is not cheap or worthless – it is so valuable that no finite price could ever capture it. A "blameless" life is not a barely acceptable one – it is a life of the highest and most complete moral standing available.

In every one of these words, the total absence of a bad thing does not describe a weak, middling, or empty version of its opposite. It describes the opposite carried to its absolute *active* ceiling.

A corpse, of course, is also technically painless, and technically fearless, and technically tireless – it feels nothing, so nothing can trouble it. But nobody calls a corpse fearless. Fearlessness is a word for the living: it names an person who could feel fear, in circumstances where fear would be the ordinary response, and does not. Take away the capacity to feel anything at all, and the word no longer applies to what remains – it becomes a category error, not a compliment. This is the difference between an expression and a prescription. "Fearless" is an expression, a vivid and economical way of naming a living, acting person exhibiting the ceiling of courage. It is not a prescription telling that person to stop feeling anything. Exactly the same is true of "absence of pain" in Epicurus. It is an expression naming the ceiling of pleasure in a living, feeling person who is engaging in readily-understandable pleasures – not a prescription instructing him to feel nothing, want nothing, and do nothing, the way a corpse does.

You already know this rule. You apply it instinctively, every time you hear one of these words, without needing it explained to you. And yet the moment the identical rule is applied to Epicurus's most famous phrase – that the limit of pleasure is the complete removal of pain – a great many readers abandon their common sense entirely. They hear "absence of pain" and, instead of applying the "fearless" rule, they apply the opposite one: they picture something numbed, muted, and nearly featureless, a low-hum condition barely distinguishable from not existing at all. This is not a minor misreading to be corrected with a footnote. It is the single most consequential distortion of Epicurean philosophy in circulation today, and the goal of correcting it is the reason EpicureanFriends exists.

The assumption does not arise from the Epicurean texts. It is imported from other traditions the reader has absorbed long before ever opening Epicurus. Buddhism teaches that craving is the root of suffering and that liberation lies in extinguishing desire. Stoicism teaches that the passions are to be mastered and, ideally, silenced. Modern Nihilism treats desire itself as a kind of joke played on us by evolution, with detachment as the only dignified response. All three tradi-

tions, and the general modern discomfort with naming pleasure a serious philosophical goal, converge on the same picture: the wise man is the calm man, and calm is achieved by wanting less, feeling less, and eventually approaching a kind of stillness that has more in common with sleep, or with death, than with being fully alive.

Readers carrying that picture in their heads have inverted Epicurus's formula to the opposite of its intended meaning. They read into it exactly what their own predispositions have trained them to expect: an endpoint of near-total absence of anything, not an endpoint of maximal, active pleasure.

That reading is not just wrong. It is ridiculous, and it is offensive – offensive to Epicurus, who wrote it, and offensive to the whole civilization that produced him.

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## Aulus Gellius Already Explained This, Eighteen Hundred Years Ago

Long before this article ever needed to reach for the "fearless" and "flawless" examples, a Roman writer with no interest whatsoever in Epicurean ethics had already worked out the exact same logical principle and had already applied it directly to Epicurus.

Aulus Gellius, a second-century AD Roman, was not defending Epicurus. He was defending the poet Virgil, in a dispute with other grammarians over three of Virgil's word choices. One of those words was *inlaudatus* – "unpraised" – used of the mythical king Busiris, who murdered every foreign guest who came to his shores. The other grammarians objected that this was far too mild a word for a monster: surely such a man deserved to be called something stronger than merely "unpraised." Gellius's answer is the "fearless" rule stated as an explicit principle of logic. Almost no one, however wicked, goes through life without doing at least one thing that could be called praiseworthy in some small degree – so a man of whom *nothing at all* can be praised, without a single exception, is not a mildly bad man. He is the worst kind of man there is. Gellius makes the same point with *inculpatus* – "blameless" – stating plainly that freedom from every fault

simply *is* the same thing as perfect goodness, not a weaker or different condition standing next to it. He then shows the identical device at work in Homer, who "usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults": when Homer says the Greeks charged "not unwillingly," he does not mean a lukewarm willingness – he means the utmost eagerness.[1]

Having established the rule three separate ways, Gellius adds a fourth example, and it is Epicurus's own definition of pleasure: "Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain, in these words: 'The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of all that pains.'"[2] Gellius places that sentence in exactly the same category as "unpraised" and "blameless" and Homer's "not unwillingly." He is not reporting that Epicurus pointed to some third, hollowed-out condition standing apart from pleasure. He is reporting that Epicurus used the identical logical structure as every other example in the chapter: total negation of the bad thing (pain) states the maximum degree of the good thing (pleasure) – not a different thing, and not a lesser one. To a literate Roman reader of the second century AD, with no stake at all in Epicurean philosophy, "absence of pain" was a "fearless"-type phrase, not a "numb"-type phrase, and it plainly meant what it said. The full case, including Gellius's fourth example from Virgil and his complete chain of reasoning, is set out here.

Epicurus's own school made the identical claim under a far harder test than an offhand grammatical example: direct, hostile cross-examination. In Cicero's *On Ends*, Torquatus, the Epicurean spokesman, is pressed three separate times, from three separate directions, to concede that absence of pain is merely related to pleasure, or a step toward it, or a lesser cousin of it. Each time he refuses, and each time his answer is more emphatic than the last: "I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too."[3] Asked whether the negation of pain is "the same thing as pleasure," his answer is unqualified: "Absolutely the same," said he, "indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible."[4] The full exchange is set out here. Nothing in that exchange describes a numbed or diminished condition. It describes a ceiling – the highest point pleasure can reach, with nothing further to add.

## The Corpse Is Not the Goal

Ancient critics understood immediately what was actually at stake, and they attacked Epicurus for it directly rather than politely. Cicero, arguing on behalf of the Cyrenaics against Epicurus in *De Finibus*, pressed exactly this objection: that a life defined only by the absence of pain is the "*summum bonum* of a corpse" – the highest good of a dead body. Modern scholarship has had to answer the same charge in the same terms. Kelly Arenson, in *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus* (2019), names it as one of the central problems any serious account of Epicurean pleasure must solve: Epicureans need "a robust response to the Cyrenaic criticism that the Epicurean good resembles the state of a corpse: dead bodies might be painless, but they certainly are not enjoying health."[5] She poses the challenge just as bluntly later in the same book: "How would Epicureans dodge the charge that their best life resembles the state of a corpse?"[6]

The honest answer is that Epicureans do not need to dodge this charge, because the reading that produces it is false. A corpse feels nothing at all – no pleasure, no pain, no awareness of any kind. Epicurus never once described the goal of life that way. He described a condition of maximal, positively felt enjoyment, one so complete that no addition could make it any fuller. Confusing that with the total absence of feeling that a corpse experiences is not a subtle scholarly slip. It requires ignoring what the man actually wrote in favor of what several unrelated traditions have trained modern readers to expect him to have meant – the same error as hearing "fearless" and picturing a coward.

Arenson herself, later in the same book (p. 161), explains exactly why the corpse-reading could never have been Epicurus's own position, and the reasoning applies with even more force to "absence of pain" than to the example she uses, health.[7] She asks why the Epicureans, who stress how central health and the awareness of it are to happiness, did not simply name health itself as the highest good instead of pleasure:

> "Perhaps the Epicureans do not stop at health because they are interested in describing the *telos* in terms of human feelings: that is, even if health were ontologically or epistemologically the best condition for humans, Epicureans would not be interested unless health also felt the best. We get the sense that in Plato's eyes the just life will still be the best even if it is not the most pleas-

> ant: a just soul is always ontologically better than an unjust one. But the goal of Epicureanism is to help people feel better – to lessen their anxiety, help them avoid frustrated desires, and enable them to enjoy their lives. To say that health itself is the goal, divorced from our perceptions of how health feels, would be nonsensical to Epicureans, who would argue that health is worth talking about at all only because of its connection to the feeling of pleasure."[8]

And, a few lines later, stated as a general principle rather than as a claim limited to health:

> "Epicureans would say that were health not linked to pleasure in this way, there would be no reason to care about health's ontological credentials."[9]

Substitute "absence of pain" for "health" in that sentence and the corpse-reading collapses on the spot. A corpse has, in a trivial biological sense, achieved a condition free of tissue damage and free of nerve signaling – an ontological state that could be described, from the outside, as "painless." But Epicurus was never interested in painlessness as a bare ontological fact about a body, any more than Arenson shows he was interested in health as a bare ontological fact independent of how it feels. He was interested in painlessness only and precisely because, in a living, feeling creature, it *is* the felt experience of the greatest pleasure. Strip away the feeling, as death strips it away completely, and "absence of pain" stops referring to anything Epicurus cared about at all – it becomes exactly the kind of ontological credential, divorced from feeling, that Arenson says would be "nonsensical" to an Epicurean. The corpse-reading does not merely get Epicurus wrong by accident. It requires attributing to him the one move Arenson shows, from his own texts, that he explicitly refused to make.

## Whose Assumption Is This, Really?

Ask someone who confidently announces that "Epicurus taught absence of pain as the highest pleasure" – said, invariably, with the flat certainty of a person stating the obvious, as if this settled that Epicurus was some kind of proto-Buddhist, or a Stoic in disguise, or an ancient Nihilist recommending that we want as little as possible before we die – how they know they have understood him correctly. The honest answer, if they gave one, would rarely be "because I checked it against what Epicurus and his students actually wrote." It would be closer to:

"because that is what the phrase sounds like it should mean." But that is not a reading of Epicurus. It is a reading of Buddhism, or Stoicism, or Nihilism, performed on Epicurus's sentence and then handed back to him as if it were his own conclusion. The confidence behind that reading is not evidence that the reader has understood Epicurus correctly. It is only evidence of how completely some other tradition got there first.

This ought to prompt real embarrassment, not confidence, once the historical record is taken into account. Epicureanism was not a marginal, ignored curiosity that limped along unnoticed for a few decades. It was one of the two or three most influential philosophical movements in the Mediterranean world for roughly five hundred years, drawing devoted followers across every social rank – Roman senators and generals among them, men like Torquatus and Cassius Longinus who staked real political and military careers on the philosophy they professed, and a poet, Lucretius, who spent a lifetime composing one of the greatest didactic poems in any language specifically to convert his countrymen to it. Diogenes of Oinoanda, an old man in Asia Minor, spent a fortune having Epicurus's philosophy carved into a public wall – one of the largest inscriptions to survive from the ancient world – for the explicit purpose of reaching total strangers passing through his town and generations yet unborn. None of that happens for a philosophy whose highest promise is to feel as little as possible before dying. People do not reorganize their lives, spend their fortunes, and risk their reputations promoting a doctrine of studied numbness. The ancient world was not shy about mocking philosophies it found absurd or life-denying – plenty of that mockery survives, aimed at other targets – and a "best life indistinguishable from a corpse" would have been laughed out of any room in Athens or Rome. Epicureanism took plenty of hostile fire from Stoic and Academic rivals over other points. It never took this one, because friend and enemy alike understood, without needing it explained, that Epicurus was recommending a life of active, vivid, secured pleasure – not a life of numbness dressed up in philosophical language.

So the modern reader who is so sure Epicurus meant something close to nothingness has a real question to answer, and it is not a question about Epicurus: why, if that reading were correct, did hundreds of thousands of people across five centuries – people who were not stupid, and who lived in a culture with no pa-

tience for philosophical cowardice – organize their friendships, their poetry, their politics, and their public inscriptions around it? The far simpler explanation is the one this article opened with. The reading is wrong, and its confident modern advocates are, without realizing it, describing their own inherited assumptions about what a philosophy of "absence" must mean – not anything Epicurus, or the ancient world that embraced him, ever actually said.

## What Homer's Greeks Would Have Made of This

The 2026 release of Christopher Nolan's film adaptation of *The Odyssey* has put Odysseus back in front of a mass audience for the first time in a generation, and the timing could not be more useful. Whatever else can be said about the character, no one watching that film mistakes Odysseus for a man seeking stillness. He schemes. He fights. He grieves, rages, weeps, seduces, endures, and claws his way home across a decade of disaster because he wants, with total intensity, the specific pleasures of his own house, his own wife, and his own kingdom. This is the Greek heroic ideal Epicurus was born into and wrote for: a culture that prized *aretē*, excellence in action, and that would have found the suggestion that the best possible life is one indistinguishable from a corpse's not merely wrong but insulting – a slander against everything a Greek audience understood a flourishing life to look like.

Epicurus did not reject that vigor. He redirected it. He rejected the fear, superstition, and needless strife that made so much Greek and Roman striving self-defeating, and he rejected the idea that struggle and status were ends in themselves. But he never once suggested that the goal of life was to want nothing, feel nothing, and do nothing. The *Letter to Menoeceus* closes not with a picture of stillness but with a picture of vivid, active blessedness: "Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not like unto a mortal being."[10] A god among men is not a man reduced to the condition of a corpse. It is a man living at the fullest possible pitch of secure, confident, active enjoyment – exactly the register in which Homer's audience, and Epicurus's own Greek and Roman readers, understood the phrase.

## Absence of Pain Answers One Question, Not Every Question

Here the argument has to go one step further, because getting past the corpse-reading is necessary but not sufficient. Suppose a person accepts every argument above: absence of pain is not nothingness, it is pleasure at its highest degree, and the goal of life is an active, vivid, godlike condition rather than a numbed one. That still leaves the question every serious ethical philosophy has to answer: which pleasures?

In a universe with no supernatural god standing over it, no heaven or hell waiting afterward, and no existence of any kind after death, no rational person would choose to spend the single life available to him on anything less than the fullest pursuit of pleasure that circumstances allow. That much follows immediately from Epicurean physics and theology, and it is close to the entire structure of the argument for why pleasure, not some other standard, must be the goal. But stating that pleasure is the goal, and stating that absence of pain names pleasure at its ceiling, still does not by itself tell anyone what to do with a given afternoon, a given friendship, a given ambition, or a given fear. "Absence of pain" is a statement about the *quality* of the pleasures in question – that they come with no attached cost, no residue of pain to offset them – and says nothing whatsoever about their number, their variety, or their intensity. A life filled with a thousand different vivid, secure pleasures, and a life containing only one thin pleasure, can both be correctly described as free of pain. The phrase does not choose between them.

This is exactly why the traditional Greco-Roman Epicurean picture of the ideal life was never a picture of restriction. The ideal was a life "as a god among men": active, socially engaged, full of friendship, intellectual work, natural affection, and sensory enjoyment, all of it secured against fear and disturbance rather than narrowed down to avoid it. "Absence of pain" describes the condition under which those pleasures are enjoyed – undiluted by an accompanying cost – not a cap on how many of them a person is entitled to have, or how vividly he is permitted to feel them.

## The Worst Possible Way to Teach Epicurus

There is a further point here, and it is not merely that the bare phrase is incomplete. It is that reciting "Epicurus taught absence of pain as pleasure – the highest pleasure" and stopping there, without immediately cashing it out in terms of an active, vivid, secured life, is close to the single worst way anyone could choose to introduce Epicurus to a newcomer.

Think about what that bare sentence actually hands the listener. It gives no worked example, no picture of a life, no anchor in anything the listener has already felt. It gives only a formula built entirely out of a negative – and a formula built entirely out of a negative, offered with no positive content attached, is a coin flip at best. Every rival framework the average listener already carries in his head – Buddhism, Stoicism, Nihilism, and the general modern instinct that pleasure is a slightly disreputable subject for serious philosophy – has spent a lifetime training him to resolve that coin flip the wrong way. Say "absence of pain is the highest pleasure" and stop, and you have not taught Epicurus. You have handed the listener a blank check and watched him fill it in with whatever tradition got to him first. This is exactly backward from how the "fearless" rule works in ordinary speech, where the word arrives already loaded with the picture of a specific courageous person doing something specific and courageous. Nobody has to be told what a fearless soldier is doing. Everybody has to be told, or shown, what a life of "absence of pain" is doing – and if no one bothers to show them, most will guess wrong, not because they are careless, but because every incentive in their prior education points them toward the wrong guess.

This is why teaching or defending Epicurus with the bare formula alone, however technically accurate it may be, is not a neutral simplification. It is close to malpractice. It reliably manufactures the very misreading this article exists to correct, in the mind of the exact person the teacher was presumably trying to reach. The formula has to arrive already attached to what it actually describes – friendship, security, honest inquiry into nature, the vivid enjoyment of food and drink and sex and beautiful things, a life "as a god among men" – or it should not be offered at all. A phrase that requires the listener to already know the conclusion in order to reach the correct conclusion is not doing any teaching work; it is only

doing work for those who already agree, and actively doing harm to everyone else.

## Why the "Not NeoEpicurean, But Epicurean" Statement Exists

EpicureanFriends did not leave this correction to chance, and it is worth being explicit about why. The Community Standards and Posting Policies page includes a short list titled "Not NeoEpicurean, But Epicurean," and its second point states the corpse-reading problem as directly as it can be stated:

> "Not 'absence of pain' as a full statement of the goal of life, but 'the Feelings are two, pleasure and pain' and 'Pleasure is the beginning and the end of a happy life.'"[11]

That single line exists because the corpse-reading is not a rare error confined to unread newcomers. It is the default assumption that Buddhism, Stoicism, and Nihilism have primed nearly every modern reader to bring to Epicurus before he has said a word for himself. The statement is written to intercept that assumption at the door, before it can quietly reshape everything a new participant reads afterward.

The rest of the list performs the identical function from other angles, and none of it is accidental. The eighth point rejects "supernatural gods" and "life after death" in favor of the confidence that, "for those men for whom wisdom is possible... such men may truly live as gods" – the same vigorous, active standard argued for above, not a numbed one. The ninth point rejects "short term hedonism" in favor of Epicurus's own invitation "to continuous pleasures," ruling out the opposite and equally common misreading, that Epicurean pleasure means impulsive, momentary indulgence rather than a whole life secured and filled with pleasure over time.[12] Taken together, the list is not a loose set of talking points. It is a single sustained defense, restated eleven different ways, against the same recurring failure: the tendency to substitute some other tradition's goal – virtue for its own sake, flourishing, tranquility, momentary indulgence, or the featureless calm of nothingness – for the plain, positive, active pleasure Epicurus actually named as the goal of life.

## The Stakes

None of this is a quarrel over translation nuance. To tell a room full of people that the wisest possible human life is one "hardly distinguishable from a corpse" is not a defensible scholarly position with something to be said for it. It is an insult to the man who wrote "we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing," and it is an insult to the civilization that produced Odysseus, Achilles, and every other Greek figure whose vigor and appetite for life the ancient world actually admired.[13] Epicurus did not spend his life building a philosophy in order to recommend that his students aspire to feel as little as possible before they die. He built it so that they could feel as much good, for as long as possible, with as little cost as ingenuity and friendship could arrange. That is the case this article, and the community that maintains it, exists to keep making.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# More Does Not Mean Better: The Binary Analysis of Pleasure and Pain — and What It Tells Us About the Best Life

*A central claim of Epicurean ethics in regard to pleasure is that more and better are not the same thing. The longest life is not necessarily the happiest; the most food is not the tastiest; the most of anything is not automatically the best of it. Epicurus built this common-sense understanding into a formal philosophical foundation through a rigorous binary analysis of feeling: there are exactly two feelings, pleasure and pain, with no neutral state between them, which means that the absence of pain is not a waiting-room before pleasure arrives but is itself pleasure, fully and actually present. That answers the first question any ethics must face — is there a goal in life higher or better than pleasure? No. But it immediately raises the second, equally important question: which pleasures are to be chosen? Here the governing standard is not the most pleasure but the most pleasant — a superlative quality of life, not a comparative race for always-more. This dissolves Plato's challenge that pleasure as a goal admits no limit, and opens directly onto the practical work of Epicurean wisdom: that of navigating among the pleasures available, guided by the senses, anticipations, and feelings, toward the specific combination that constitutes the genuinely best life a particular person is capable of living.*

Every person who has ever eaten past the point of fullness, or spent money on something that failed to improve their life, or worked more hours toward a goal that retreated as they approached it, already understands the central claim of this article: more is not the same as better. The most food is not the tastiest meal. The longest life is not necessarily the happiest. The wealthiest person is not automatically the most satisfied. The most physically imposing body is not automat-

ically the most attractive. More of a thing and the best of that thing are two entirely different questions — and confusing them is the source of most of what goes wrong in the pursuit of a good life. No reasonable person would expect Epicurus to have been unaware of this everyday observation, and indeed Epicurean philosophy builds on this insight and gives it a firm philosophical foundation.

Epicurus asserts a perspective about feeling that is both simple and radical: it is reasonable to categorize all feelings into exactly two: pleasure and pain, and nothing else. Every sentient experience falls into one category or the other. From this perspective 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 perspective carries with it 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.** Absence of pain is neither a diminished nor a heightened experience of pleasure, not a placeholder waiting for "real" pleasure to arrive, not a pleasure of a different kind that is superior or higher and the true goal of life, but one among many states of 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.

This perspective — in which the absence of pain is pleasure — answers the first question Epicurean ethics must answer: is there any goal in life higher or better than pleasure? The answer is no. Whatever we determine in our own situations to be genuinely desirable falls within what the word "pleasure" describes. But answering the first question immediately raises a second, which is equally important and entirely different: *which* pleasures should I pursue? The binary tells us the full extent of the territory of the desirable. It says nothing about how to navigate within that territory.

A cup can be full and still be filled with less than optimal contents. Someone who has reached the limit the binary defines — who has eliminated pain of all kinds — might make the mistake of filling his hours with pleasures that he finds to be shallow, brief, or isolating, while the deeper pleasures of philosophy, friendship, and engaged living go neglected. The word "pleasure" names what the Epicurean pursues in the way that "virtue" names what a Stoic pursues, or "piety"

names what a religious believer pursues — the name gives direction to the entire enterprise but does not specify exactly how to spend a single moment of real-world time. The binary establishes the general description of what to aim for and what to avoid. Choosing well among the experiences that qualify as desirable is a different and deeper task, and it is a task that Epicurean philosophy addresses squarely.

Epicurus addressed both the task of identifying the best life as pleasure, and the task of choosing among available pleasures, as part of the same analysis. He connects the two tasks explicitly in the *Letter to Menoeceus* ([128]): *"For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; but when we do not feel pain, we no longer need pleasure."*[1] When pain is absent, the need is not for more pleasure in the raw quantitative sense — the cup is already at its limit. The need is for the pleasures that we find most pleasant rather than necessarily the most numerous. Without the binary of pleasure and pain you cannot orient yourself — you have no consistent principle to distinguish moving toward the good from moving away from it. But without an understanding of how to navigate wisely among the experiences that fall within the desirable, you have a direction that delivers nothing more than the vague instruction to find things you enjoy. This is why Epicurus insisted so forcefully on always returning to the concrete: to the senses, to anticipations, to feelings. No abstraction, not even the word "pleasure," can substitute for the direct report of experience. The life being lived is always particular, always concrete, always exactly as real as what your senses, anticipations, and feelings are telling you right now.

The argument is sound, but logic alone rarely produces conviction. What makes an argument 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 and built their philosophy on illustrations, not just propositions.

This article develops the full analysis: the logical case for the binary, the philosophical insight its application requires, its implications for understanding the best life, and the distinction between identifying the limit of pleasure and prescribing its contents — a distinction that is, in the end, the distinction between more and better. Illustrations drawn from the Epicurean texts and from contem-

porary experience support each stage of the argument. Two things must be addressed before the illustrations: the historical context that made the argument necessary, and the logical argument itself.

The arguments in this article rely heavily on fundamental observations made by David Sedley in his work "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 should 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 those of Cassius Amicus, not those of Dr. Sedley or other commentators referenced here.

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## The Historical Target — What Epicurus Was Arguing Against

Before presenting the argument, it is worth establishing what Epicurus was arguing against. Why did this binary claim 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, agreed that pleasure was the goal of life. But they defined pleasure differently. For the Cyrenaics, pleasure consisted in smooth motion — movement, stimulation, excitement, and other pleasures of active sensation. Pain consisted in rough motion. 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 is often the first thought of anyone who reflects on pleasure and observes that eating a meal produces positive sensation, a headache produces pain, but sitting quietly between meals produces neither. The Cyrenaic position is the obvious first thought, and it is the position most people hold before they have been persuaded otherwise.

Epicurus's denial of the neutral state was therefore a direct rejection of a philosophical alternative with enormous practical stakes. If the unstimulated state — simply being alive, freedom from anxiety, the condition of a body functioning without disturbance — is 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 Cyrenaic error was, at its root, the error of assuming that more stimulation means better pleasure — that movement, excitement, and active sensation are inherently superior to the quiet contentment of a life free from disturbance. It is the ancient philosophical form of the "more is better" mistake. Epicurus's binary argument cuts the ground from under this assumption: the state the Cyrenaics called neutral is in fact the highest pleasure in terms of quantity. The quiet life free from pain does not need more added to it in order to qualify as pleasurable. What it may need — what the wise Epicurean actively cultivates — is not more pleasure but better pleasure: the richest and most enduring combination of experiences available within the territory identified as fully pleasant.

The binary argument is the instrument Epicurus used to establish exactly this: that the simple life, free of pain, is not merely neutral but already fully pleasant. The sections that follow present that argument and its implications for what constitutes the best life.

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## The First Issue: A Clear Identification of The Desirable And The Undesirable

A logical structure for defining a goal is most clear when it takes a precise form, and Epicurus divided his universe of motivations into precisely two categories: those that are desirable (pleasure) and those that are undesirable (pain). Among the benefits of this approach are that two categories are **jointly exhaustive** — together they cover every possible case and nothing falls outside them. They are **mutually exclusive** — nothing can belong to both categories 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 ambiguity, and without exception.

Pleasure and pain, as Epicurus defines them, form exactly such a pair of desirable and undesirable. As defined by Epicurus they cover every possible state of sentient experience — nothing falls outside them. No single experience can be both pleasant (desirable) and painful (undesirable) 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 perspective that amounts to 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 perspective. 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 to name such a verdict exists, but when there are truly only two possible verdicts the reality it would name does not.

This same logical structure — two categories, jointly exhaustive, mutually exclusive, leaving no third option — is critical to the understanding of both Epicurean physics and 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 the field of ethics. 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. And from this you also understand that Epicurean physics is not rendered obsolete or incorrect by modern science,

as it was never intended in the first place to be a final technical explanation of every detail of the universe. Epicurean philosophy is a tool of general analysis for practical human life — not a cookbook with endless detailed instructions for baking your own universe from scratch.

One scope limitation must be stated plainly before proceeding, because the failure to state it produces a misreading so common it must be headed off at the start. This binary 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. All pleasures are not the same in every respect. 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 it to you to pursue 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 complete description of any individual experience, and does not reduce individual experiences to equivalence.

It is perfectly appropriate to say that it is a pleasure to trim your fingernails. It is perfectly appropriate to say that building a rocket and flying to the moon is a pleasure. What is *not* perfectly appropriate is to make the mistake of concluding that since both experiences are pleasurable, both experiences are identical. This should be obvious, yet many modern commentaries on Epicurean ethics proceed as if this distinction was totally lost on Epicurus, and that it made absolutely no difference to him what activity we choose to pursue so long as it fits under the category "pleasure."

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 analysis establishes the boundaries of the territory. It does not flatten it.

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## Why This Requires Philosophy, Not Just Observation

The bodies-and-space binary analysis presents itself to the senses directly. Anyone can point to a stone and distinguish it from the empty space around it. As Thomas Jefferson described his Epicurean perspective to John Adams in a private letter from 1820:

> I feel: therefore I exist. I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existencies then. I call them *matter*. I feel them changing place. This gives me motion. Where there is an absence of matter, I call it *void*, or *nothing*, or *immaterial* *space*. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.

No philosophical argument is required to see or feel by touch or taste that solid matter and open void are two different things. The evidence is immediate, felt, and undeniable to anyone whose senses are operational.

The binary of pleasure and pain is logically airtight by the same method — but it does not present itself to unaided observation with equal clarity. Most people recognize pleasure in stimulation: in eating, in drinking, in conversation, in movement, in excitement, in the arrival of something they have been waiting for. Pain is equally unmistakable when it arrives. But the unstimulated state — the ordinary condition of a living body not undergoing any particular sensation — is not instinctively classified as pleasure. At a physical level most people find that it registers, if it registers at all, as something they consider to be a neutral interval: a baseline that precedes pleasure rather than constituting it.

This is the gap that Norman DeWitt identifies as Epicurus's most significant philosophical contribution. As DeWitt observed, the major innovation of Epicurean philosophy was the extension of the name of pleasure to the normal but unstimulated state. To our knowledge that extension had not been made — at least with such impact — before Epicurus. The word "pleasure" had been reserved, by common usage and by earlier philosophical analysis alike, for the condition of active stimulation. Epicurus extended it to cover the condition of simple freedom from pain — the ordinary, unstimulated state of a living body functioning without disturbance. The name may not have been applied to this

state before, DeWitt notes, but that does not mean the extension was unjustified — or that people would not be better off for recognizing it.

Epicurus makes the conclusion explicit in the *Letter to Menoeceus*: life itself, when pain is not present, is desirable. Not because of any particular pleasure that has arrived or is anticipated — but because life, simply as the condition of being alive without pain, is already a state we would choose to continue over any alternative. This is a philosophical conclusion, not a perceptual observation. It requires thinking past the common assumption that the baseline is neutral and that pleasure begins only when stimulation arrives.

Epicurean philosophy supplies compelling reasons for this conclusion. We exist for only a brief period within an eternity in which we do not exist — before birth and after death there is no experience, no joy, no fear, no loss. Life alone gives us the possibility of experiencing anything desirable at all. Given this, the simple possession of life — the fact of existing, of being capable of sensation, of having the conditions for pleasure present — should be recognized as something of positive value, not a neutral waiting-room. Add to this the repeated Epicurean teaching that pleasure is easy to obtain and requires little: that a modest supply of food, friends, and time for philosophical reflection are sufficient conditions for a full and genuinely pleasurable life. The person who understands this is not driven by chronic dissatisfaction toward escalating stimulation. Such a person can recognize the value of what he already possesses.

Those who do not go to the trouble of studying nature and reaching this conclusion will never appreciate what is available to those who do. Understanding our true place in the universe — that we are natural beings in a natural world, not subjects of supernatural powers stacked against us — removes entire categories of anxiety that would otherwise fill the unstimulated state with dread rather than allowing it to be recognized for what it is. The Epicurean argument that nothing painful can happen to us after death, because after death we do not exist, removes the most pervasive of those anxieties entirely. The person freed from fear of divine punishment, freed from fear of death, freed from the belief that the universe is an adversarial force requiring constant appeasement, stands in a fundamentally different relationship to the ordinary moments of life. Those moments, which appear to others as merely neutral intervals between pleasures, are

recognized by the Epicurean as already constituting a good life — not as a diminished version of something better, but as the full and actual thing itself.

This is what the binary, correctly understood, makes possible. It is not merely a logical definition. It is the philosophical foundation of an entirely different attitude toward life, available only to those who have done the work of understanding it.

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## The Second Issue: Pleasures Differ and We Must Navigate Among Them

When a Stoic philosopher says the goal of life is "virtue," that statement orients the entire pursuit. While it does not tell anyone precisely how to spend a single specific moment of life, we do not ordinarily criticize the terminology for being imprecise or ambiguous. When a religious person says "piety," that general principle does not specify whether to build a hospital or write a sermon or feed a neighbor. In each case the general principle supplies the direction; practical wisdom fills in the details. Epicurus's "pursue pleasure, avoid pain" works the same way — it establishes the direction of a life without prescribing the contents of any particular moment. The person who hears "pursue pleasure" and concludes that all pleasures are therefore equally worth pursuing has made the same error as the Stoic who hears "pursue virtue" and concludes that all virtuous acts are therefore equally important and equally suited to every person and circumstance. The general principle is an orientation, not a detailed instruction book.

Epicurus never intended the conceptual binary of pleasure and pain to substitute for direct experience. He was, above all, the philosopher who insisted most forcefully on always returning to the concrete: to the senses, to anticipations, to feelings. Mathematics can describe the universe; geometry can map its surfaces; philosophy can organize its contents — but none of these abstractions constitutes the reality they describe. The words "pleasure" and "pain" are concepts that organize experience. They are not the experiences themselves.

This is why the binary, once understood, immediately raises the practical question that the binary alone cannot answer: *which pleasures?* That question has no

universal specific answer that applies to all people, places, and times. It is always particular to a person, a circumstance, a time. What is pleasant for you today may not be what was pleasant yesterday, and what is pleasant for you may not be pleasant for another person in the same situation. Referring to an example used by Cicero in debating the question with Torquatus, the host who is pouring wine and the guest who is drinking it may both be, in the abstract sense, experiencing the height of pleasure. However their specific pleasures are not the same pleasure, and Epicurus knew this. To say that both are "at the limit" says something philosophically important but in application provides only a generality. "At the limit" tells you that neither is experiencing pain in that moment and that neither can increase pleasure by some purely quantitative addition. It tells you nothing whatsoever about which of the innumerable experiences available to each of them will actually constitute the most pleasurable experience for them.

This is the gap that Epicurean canonics fills. The senses report what is actually happening. The anticipations allow us to recognize patterns from which we can then assemble projections of likely consequences — what this choice will lead to, what pleasures and pains it will bring down the road. The feelings confirm or correct — does this experience, in practice, feel as good as anticipated, or does it carry hidden costs? These three instruments together are what we must use to navigate within the territory that the binary defines. Without the binary we have no organizing principle — every sensation is just a perception with no direction. Without the return to concrete experience we have a direction but no instrument for navigating it.

The binary and the direct appeal to experience are therefore not competitors but partners at different levels of the same inquiry. Epicurus insisted on both simultaneously. He established the conceptual binary because a philosophy that cannot name its goal cannot pursue it. He insisted on the canonics because a philosophy that does not constantly check its abstractions against concrete reality will drift into the kind of endless speculation he regarded as not merely useless but actively harmful to the pursuit of a good life. The word "pleasure" is indispensable for talking about the goal of life. It becomes dangerous the moment anyone forgets that the word is a name for a *class* of innumerable specific, irreducibly individual experiences. The task of living well requires attending to specific experi-

ences with intelligence, care, and honesty that the word "pleasure," all by itself, is incapable of providing.

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## The Limit and the Best Life: "Most" Is Not the Same as "Most Pleasant"

*Principal Doctrine 3* states the consequence of the binary directly: "The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasure."[2] Once pain is fully removed, pleasure is at its maximum — the cup is full, and no further addition is possible. What the limit establishes is the top of the scale. What it does not establish — and what Epicurus never intended it to establish — is which specific combination of pleasurable experiences constitutes the best life.

Cicero presses this point in *On Ends* Book II (section 11), asking whether the negation or absence of pain is truly the same thing as pleasure. The Epicurean answer is direct: *"Absolutely the same," said he, "indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible"* (*plane idem, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest*).[3] The negation of pain is pleasure — and it is the greatest pleasure in terms of quantity — the ceiling that cannot be exceeded. But here is the critical move: the maximum in terms of quantity is not the same as the best in terms of quality. A cup cannot be made more than full. But a full cup containing the wrong things is not preferable to a full cup containing the right things. A full cup containing the wrong things may even be less preferable than a cup only partly full but with better quality content. The question of which pleasures to seek within the full cup is not a quantitative question at all. It is entirely qualitative. This is exactly the "more does not mean better" principle at the heart of Epicurean ethics: Epicurus establishes the quantitative limit with precision, and then immediately points past it to the qualitative question that is the real work.

The analogy to bodies and space, rightly extended, makes this unmistakably clear. When Epicurus says everything in the universe is either body or void, he is making a claim about categories — not prescribing which bodies are most important, or how much matter is desirable. He does not say the heaviest body is the best body, or that the most densely packed arrangement of matter is the one

to seek. Bodies differ from one another in an almost unlimited number of ways — including size, shape, weight, composition, motion, and effect. Recognizing that everything solid belongs to the same category tells you nothing about which of those bodies you should prefer, work with, eat, or build with. The category and the evaluation are distinct operations. Confusing them would be absurd.

The same distinction applies in ethics with equal force. Recognizing that everything desirable belongs to the category of pleasure tells you nothing about which pleasures you should pursue, in what order, for how long, and in what combination. The limit of pleasure marks the top of the scale. It does not specify what belongs in the measurement. This is not a gap in the system, but rather the point at which the system opens onto the full meaning of Epicurean philosophy.

Epicurus states the governing principle explicitly in the *Letter to Menoeceus*: *"... just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."*[4] This passage is not a footnote or a qualification. It is the governing principle stated with precision. More food is not better food. More time is not a better life. What matters in both cases is not quantity but the specific character of the experience. The person who accumulates food indiscriminately has not eaten well. The person who accumulates years without attending to their quality has not lived well. The Epicurean goal is not to maximize the raw amount of pleasure — it is to make the mixture as genuinely pleasing as it can be.

*Principal Doctrine 9* reinforces this from another angle: *"If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted and influenced the whole body or the most essential parts of our nature, the pleasures would never differ from one another."*[5] Epicurus states plainly that pleasures differ — in intensity, in duration, and in which parts of the body or mind they engage. This is not a correction appended to the ethics from the outside. It is a foundational observation that shapes the entire enterprise. If pleasures were interchangeable, the question of which to pursue would not exist. Because pleasures differ in every dimension that matters, choosing among them is genuine and irreplaceable work. The measure of a life well lived is the quality of that choosing.

A concern with the phrase "the most pleasant" needs to be addressed directly, because left unaddressed it creates an apparent tension with the full cup argument

that answered Plato. Plato's challenge to pleasure as a goal rested on the claim that pleasure admits of unlimited comparison — there is always more, so pleasure can never constitute a definite end. If "most pleasant" is read as a comparative instruction — always seek pleasure greater than what you currently have — then the phrase appears to reopen the door that Epicurus' limit of pleasure was designed to close. But "most pleasant" is not a comparative instruction. It is a superlative target — and the difference matters enormously. A superlative identifies a threshold state, complete in itself, not a position on an unlimited scale where more is always possible. The ancient philosophical tradition understood this distinction. Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus held no wise person to be wiser than another wise person. Wisdom is a threshold, and once crossed, comparative rankings within the category lose their meaning. "Wise" does not mean "wiser than someone else and always capable of being wiser still." It means having achieved the whole thing. "Virtuous" and "pious" work the same way: to be virtuous is to have attained the full condition, not to be perpetually climbing a scale that extends indefinitely upward. Superlative goals identify a quality of life to be achieved and inhabited. They are not comparative pressures toward always-more.

"Complete pleasure" — or "pure pleasure," or the "full cup" — functions in exactly this way, and this is what answers Plato. The objection that pleasure admits of unlimited addition is false, because "complete pleasure" names a threshold state, not a point on an unlimited scale. One person at the limit does not have "more" pleasure than another person equally at the limit, any more than one wise person is wiser than another wise person. Both are fully pleasurable. The full cup is full. Attempting to pour more simply overflows. The superlative is the answer to the comparative challenge: Plato was right that there is always more stimulation to seek, because variety is in fact desirable. But Epicurus's category of complete, pain-free pleasure cannot be increased by further stimulation — it is already whole.

To repeat for emphasis: "Most pleasant," understood correctly, is how the superlative standard applies in practice. When Epicurus says the wise person seeks "the most pleasant" food rather than the most food, and "the most pleasant" time rather than the longest time, he is identifying the character of the target — complete, pure, genuinely good. He is not issuing a comparative instruction to

always seek more. Just as "seek wisdom" gives no guidance about how to spend any particular moment, "seek the most pleasant" identifies the quality of the life being sought without prescribing the specific content of any particular day or any particular choice. Both are superlative orientations. Both leave the practical navigation — which combination, for this person, in these circumstances, at this stage of life — entirely to the individual, guided by the senses, anticipations, and feelings.

Lucretius supplies what may be the most vivid illustration of what goes wrong when this wisdom is absent. In *De Rerum Natura* Book IV, in his extended treatment of the distortions that erotic infatuation produces, he catalogs the ways in which lovers in the grip of passion mistake defects for virtues: a large lover with an imposing physical frame becomes "something wonderful, full of dignity" — a prodigy of magnificence whose sheer physical mass is temporarily read as superiority. Every clear-headed observer looking from outside the infatuation knows this is a distortion. Physical size is not the measure of attractiveness; sheer mass and imposing volume do not make their possessor more desirable. The pleasures of romantic love, like the pleasures of food and time, are not better simply because they are larger or more overwhelming in quantity. More body is not better body. More pleasure is not, by itself, the most pleasant.

Cicero, in *On Ends* Book II, attempts to press the same point into an objection against Torquatus. As referenced previously, Cicero suggests that on Epicurean terms, the host who pours wine and the guest who drinks — both of whom are otherwise free from pain — must be in the same state of pleasure. Torquatus dismisses this as quibbling, which is revealing in itself. He does not deny that the host and guest are having different experiences. He does not argue that pouring and drinking are equivalent. His dismissal signals what he takes Cicero to already know: the objection is not a genuine philosophical challenge but a rhetorical exploitation of a deliberate omission. Everyone — including Torquatus and Cicero both — knows that the experience of pouring wine is not the experience of drinking it. These two activities register as equivalent in the abstract sense that both persons are at the limit of pain-removal, but they are not equivalent in any other sense relevant to how a particular person ought to spend a particular moment of life.

What Cicero chose not to allow Torquatus to develop is the point whose development is required here. Both host and guest are "at the limit." What follows from this is not that their experiences are equivalent, but that within the territory of the fully pleasurable life, the question of which experiences to seek, suited to which temperament, circumstance, background, and stage of life, is the task of practical Epicurean wisdom. The binary answers the first question: is this experience desirable at all? Wisdom answers the second: of the desirable experiences available to me, which ones, in what proportion and combination, will actually constitute the best — most pleasant — life I am capable of living?

The *Letter to Menoeceus* makes this the governing standard of the entire analysis. The goal is not the most pleasure in the sense of the greatest raw quantity. It is the *most pleasant* — the combination of experiences that the whole person, reflecting across the full span of time, with senses, anticipations, and feelings as the instruments of evaluation, judges to be genuinely the best. This requires exactly what Epicurus insisted on throughout his teaching: the constant return to direct experience, the constant check of abstraction against the testimony of actual sensation. To say that pleasure is the goal is to orient the pursuit. To pursue the *most pleasant* — which is what Epicurus actually said — is to commit to the ongoing, intelligent, irreducibly individual work of building the best life one is capable of building, from whatever materials one actually has available.

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## A Binary Analysis In Four Stages — Physics and Ethics in Parallel

Epicurus did not simply assert the binary and leave it there. He followed a clear 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 for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict."[6]

**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.

The logical structure that every such illustration makes visible is the same in each case:

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 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.

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## Illustrations from the Epicurean Texts

The analysis above stands on its own. What the following illustrations add is recognizability — they make the same logical structure visible in domains where it is immediately obvious before any philosophical argument has been made. The ancient examples carry the greatest authority because they are instruments Epicurus and Lucretius themselves deployed. Each illustration is in service of the analysis; the analysis does not depend on any of them.

**Bodies and Space — The Foundational Binary**

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 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 *ἀναφὴς 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."*[7] 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."[8]

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."*[9] 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 it 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."[10] 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, "grasp the ideas attached to words" — the first mental image associated with each word must be clearly fixed — "so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning."[11] This is not merely a logical caution. It is an exact 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. It includes exuberant pleasures, such as climbing a mountain, winning a race or exploring a new country, and it also includes quieter ones: the pleasures of memory, of friendship, of philosophical conversation, of a body simply functioning without disturbance. The quiet pleasures are just as 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.

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### 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 vitai lampada tradunt"* — "and like runners hand on the torch of life."[12]

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.

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### 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 on the great sea the winds are buffeting the waters, to gaze from the land on another's great struggles."[13]

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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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## 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:

> "The pleasure we pursue is not that kind alone which affects our physical being with a definite delightful feeling,—a positively agreeable perception of the senses [kinetic pleasure]; on the contrary, the greatest pleasure according to us is that which is experienced as a result of the complete removal of pain [katastematic pleasure]. When we are released from pain, the mere sensation of complete emancipation and relief from uneasiness is in itself a source of gratification. But everything that causes gratification is a pleasure (just as everything that causes annoyance is a pain). Therefore the complete removal of pain has correctly been termed a pleasure. ... Epicurus consequently maintained that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order. A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain."[14]

Three things stand out. 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 that causes gratification is a pleasure (just as everything that causes annoyance is a pain)" — these two cover the domain entirely; anything that gratifies you falls under pleasure by definition, leaving no neutral third zone where you are neither gratified nor distressed.[15] Third, the explicit closing statement: "A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain."[16] 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 once all pain is removed, "pleasure may vary in kind, but it cannot vary in intensity or degree."[17] The variation in kind 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 state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order."[18] The "some thinkers" who held the intermediate position are 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 that *"this single thing, to escape evil, ... is the supreme good; for there is no room to lodge this good in where no more of what is painful and afflicting goes out."*[19] 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.

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## 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.

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### 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.

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### 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.

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### The Pregnant and the Not-Pregnant

A phrase that already exists in common speech 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.

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### 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.

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### 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.

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### True and False — The Law of the Excluded Middle

Every proposition is either true or false. There is no third truth-value called "neither true nor false."[20] This is the law of the excluded middle, and it applies directly to the question of feeling: the proposition "I am experiencing pleasure right now" is either true or false. If false, its negation — "I am not experiencing pleasure" — is true. And in a living, sentient creature, "not experiencing pleasure" has only one meaning: experiencing pain. The binary of the logician maps exactly onto the binary of the Epicurean, because both are expressing the same underlying structure — when there are only two possibilities and you eliminate one, the other is what remains.

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### Binary Signals — From Telegraph to Digital

At the physical level, every bit in a computer and every moment in 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 foundation 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 examples require the audience to grasp the underlying technology before the analogy can land — they do not reduce to an immediately visible picture — but for anyone who grasps the mechanism, they show the binary structure with exceptional clarity: a world of unlimited complexity and variety, built entirely on a two-state foundation that admits no third option.

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## Questions and Objections Considered

### Does The Binary Analysis Apply To Individual Sensations Or To Life As A Whole?

A question raised by the binary calls for 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.[21] 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: "A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain."[22] This applies to each way of being affected, individually — not to the sum of all ways at once.

### "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 a common misreading 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, pleasure "may vary in kind." That variation 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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## Conclusion

The binary analysis of pleasure and pain that Epicurus placed at the foundation of his philosophy is, in the end, two arguments in one — and both are needed to answer the single most important question any ethical philosophy faces: not just *what* to pursue, but *how*.

The first argument is categorical: every feeling is either pleasure or pain, with nothing left over. This is not an observation that happened to confirm common opinion. It is a philosophical position taken against live opposition, requiring the extension of the name of pleasure to the unstimulated state that most people instinctively treat as neutral. To reach that position requires studying nature: understanding that we exist briefly between eternities in which we do not exist, that life alone gives us the possibility of experiencing anything desirable at all, that the universe is not stacked against us by supernatural forces, and that death holds nothing painful because after it we do not exist. The person who has done this work stands on entirely different ground from the person who has not. The ordinary moments of life — untroubled, unstimulated, free from pain — are recognized not as neutral intervals waiting for something better to arrive, but as

already constituting the good life. This is the first argument, and it answers Plato directly: pleasure is not an unlimited comparative chase but a superlative threshold. The full cup is full. One person at the limit has no greater quantity of pleasure than another person equally at the limit. The binary closes the door on the infinite regress Plato's challenge assumed.

The second argument follows from the first with equal force: the binary tells you the direction of the whole territory, but says nothing about how to navigate within it. And this is where the "more does not mean better" principle does its most important work. The category of pleasure is vast — it covers everything any living creature, in any circumstance, finds genuinely desirable. That it covers everything desirable does not make all things that are desirable equivalent to each other. More food is not better food. More time is not a better life. The largest body in the infatuated lover's eyes is not the most desirable body. The host who pours wine and the guest who drinks are both at the limit — and not therefore having the same experience or seeking the same thing. The measure is not the most pleasure in the sense of the greatest raw quantity. It is the most pleasant — a superlative quality of life built from the specific combination of experiences that actually constitutes the best life a particular person is capable of living. Once the cup is full, the only remaining question is what it contains — and that question is answered not by adding more but by choosing better.

What bridges these two arguments, and what Epicurus never allowed to be separated from either of them, is the constant reference back to direct experience. The senses, the anticipations, and the feelings are not supplementary instruments added to an otherwise complete philosophical system. They are the system's working mechanism. The binary provides the orientation — it tells you which direction is toward the good and which is away from it. The canonics provide the navigation — they report what is actually happening, project likely consequences, and confirm or correct expectations against the evidence of lived experience. Without the binary, the canonics have no direction to navigate toward. Without the canonics, the binary is a compass with no map — a correct direction pointing at nothing anyone can actually walk toward.

The illustrations assembled in this article exist in service of this analysis. Bodies and space, the relay torch, the storm and the shore, the cardiac monitor, the

jury's verdict — each makes the same logical structure visible in a domain where it is immediately recognizable before anyone has thought to argue about it. They do not prove the arguments. The arguments stand on the texts, the logic, and the philosophical tradition Epicurus himself built. What the illustrations do is make the structure visible — felt rather than merely followed. This — rather than sterile and abstract logic and dialectic — is what Epicurus and Lucretius understood philosophy required, and why they built their work on images as well as arguments.

The whole enterprise comes to this: human life has a goal, and the name of that goal is "pleasure." What that name actually means is not a vague permission to find things you enjoy, not a blank authorization for any experience that avoids acute pain, but the living pursuit of the most pleasant life your actual circumstances make possible — which is not the most pleasure in the sense of the greatest raw quantity, but the best pleasure in the sense of the specific combination of experiences that genuinely constitutes the good life for this particular person. More and better are not the same thing. Understanding that distinction, and pursuing the better rather than simply the more, is what Epicurean philosophy teaches — and what a lifetime of honest, intelligent application of the senses, anticipations, and feelings makes possible.

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## Key Texts Referenced


- David Sedley, "The Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics," in *Ethics*, ed. Stephen Everson, *Companions to Ancient Thought*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) — the primary scholarly source for the four-stage method and the physics-ethics structural analogy used in this article
- Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book I, lines 418–448: the elimination argument establishing bodies and space as the only two existents, with no third nature possible
- Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* (Diogenes Laertius 10.38–40): the physics binary of body and void, and the methodological instruction to fix first concepts before proceeding[23]

- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Book I, sections 29–32 (Cradle Argument) and 37–38 (denial of any intermediate state between pleasure and pain)
- Metrodorus, fragment preserved in Plutarch, *Non Posse Suaviter Vivi* 1091A: "this single thing, to escape evil, ... is the supreme good; for there is no room to lodge this good in where no more of what is painful and afflicting goes out"[24]
- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine 3*: "The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasure" — establishes the quantitative ceiling without prescribing the qualitative contents of the best life[25]
- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine 9*: pleasures differ in intensity, duration, and parts of body or mind engaged — explicit statement that all pleasures are not equivalent[26]
- Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Book II, section 11: Cicero asks whether the negation of pain is truly the same as pleasure; the Epicurean response: "Absolutely the same ... indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible" (*plane idem, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest*) — the quantitative maximum is confirmed; the qualitative question of which pleasures remains open[27]
- Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Book II: the host who pours wine and the guest who drinks are both at the quantitative limit but are not experiencing equivalent specific pleasures — the objection Torquatus dismisses as quibbling
- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* ([128]): "For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; but when we do not feel pain, we no longer need pleasure" — once free from pain, the question is not more but better[28]
- Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book IV, lines 1149ff: the catalog of distortions produced by erotic infatuation, including the temporary conviction that the largest, most imposing body is the most desirable — an illustration of how more does not mean better
- Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1954) — the source of the observation that Epicurus's major philo-

sophical innovation was extending the name of pleasure to the normal unstimulated state

- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Diogenes Laertius 10.122–135): the statement that life itself, when pain is not present, is desirable; and that pleasure requires little and is easily obtained[29]
- Companion articles: "Why It Is Incorrect to Say That Epicurean Philosophy Is Primarily About the Absence of Pain"; "The Full Cup Model: Pleasure, Purity, and the Limit That Answers Plato," EpicurusToday.com

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Against Katastematic Supremacy: Pleasure Is A Unified Good, Not A House Divided Against Itself

## The Current Establishment View - Which It Is the Editorial Policy Of EpicureanFriends.com to Reject

With only a few notable exceptions, practically every modern account of Epicurean ethics repeats the same claim: Epicurus divided pleasure into two distinct kinds, ranked one above the other. Pleasure, like a house, cannot stand if it is divided against itself — and that is exactly the structure this traditional reading imposes on it. On this traditional view, **kinetic** pleasure covers everything ordinarily meant by the word — the pleasures of taste, sex, sight, hearing, and touch — while **katastematic** pleasure names a separate, higher condition: *aponia* (freedom from bodily pain) and *ataraxia* (freedom from mental disturbance). The kinetic pleasures are treated as a lesser, almost tolerated class; the katastematic condition is treated as the actual good, a state of katastematic supremacy that allegedly Epicurus really had in mind when he named pleasure the goal of life.

This view usually also leads to the assertion that Epicurus's ultimate goal should be understood to have been "tranquility" or "ataraxia." Various similar terms are also arrayed to argue that Epicurus's true goal was not pleasure as a normal person understands that term at all, but a state of calm or relief from pain very similar to that which is advocated by Buddhism or Stoicism. In a striking number of cases the word "pleasure" itself disappears from the discussion, and those who supposedly are advocating for Epicurus essentially bury the single term with which he was most identified in the ancient world by those who knew him best. The sad result of this situation is that a large majority of videos and articles pub-

lished about Epicurus today make him into an advocate for minimalism, asceticism, resignation and withdrawal - the opposite of the way the ancient Epicureans in fact lived.

It is the editorial policy of EpicureanFriends.com to reject that construction of Epicurus and the conclusions to which it leads. It is the purpose of this article to explain the foundations of that policy. Incorporated here are some - but far from all - of the points raised by several prominent academic authorities that support our editorial decision. Readers should refer to the full originals of those works for more background.

The katastematic supremacy position leans heavily on an interpretation of arguments found primarily in Cicero's *De Finibus,* where the Epicurean spokesman Torquatus defends Epicurus by holding that Epicurus included within the concept of pleasure *both* "active" pleasure that "moves nature itself with a certain sweetness" as well as a second, "static" pleasure "perceived when all pain is removed."[1] This inclusive language mirrors that of Diogenes Laertius, who also records that Epicurus embraced both types of pleasure. As to Cicero, it is important to observe that he does not argue that Epicurus was in fact elevating katastematic pleasure to supreme status. Cicero's only argument is that Epicurus was in Cicero's view being inconsistent and illogical in considering two very different things under the single name of pleasure, and that if Epicurus had been more consistent in advocating the merits of "absence of pain" he would have adopted the position of the philosopher Hieronymus who explicitly elevated a goal of absence of pain as supreme and as a result rejected pleasure.

Gosling and Taylor, writing independently and from a different angle than Nikolsky two decades later, conclude that the katastematic supremacy picture advocated by many modern scholars is not just questionable in its details but wrong in its basic shape: Epicurus never intended kinetic and katastematic pleasure as two competing kinds standing in a hierarchy, one subordinate to the other. Pleasure, for Epicurus, is one thing — the supreme good — not two competitors yoked awkwardly under a single name.

## Cicero's Own Test Case: Hieronymus of Rhodes

The argument that follows in this section is independent of both Gosling and Taylor and Nikolsky. Neither scholarly work discusses it, and it should not be read as attributed to them. It is drawn directly from Cicero's own words of the point introduced already: that Cicero charged Epicurus with inconsistency in language, not with actually elevating a separate katastematic good to supremacy over pleasure. Cicero knew that Epicurus did not do that, because he knew of another philosopher - totally separate from Epicurus and the Epicureans - *who had done exactly that*.

Cicero did not have to speculate about what a philosopher who genuinely made "freedom from pain" the supreme good, to the exclusion of pleasure, would sound like. He had a real example directly in front of him: **Hieronymus of Rhodes**, a Peripatetic philosopher who lived after Epicurus (approximately 290-230 BC) and who had Epicurus's own writings available to him when he staked out his position. Hieronymus is not a figure Cicero mentions once in passing. He names him, and explicitly contrasts him with Epicurus, in at least three separate works.

**In the *Academic Questions*,** listing the various schools by their stated goals, Cicero places Epicurus and Hieronymus in two distinct categories in the same sentence: "After him came Epicurus, whose school is now better known, though he does not exactly agree with the Cyrenaics about pleasure itself. But Callipho thought that pleasure and honor combined made up the chief good. **Hieronymus placed it in being free from all annoyance.**"[2]

**In the *Tusculan Disputations* (Book II),** Cicero again treats the two as sequential but distinct positions: "After him Epicurus easily gave into this effeminate and enervated doctrine. **After him Hieronymus, the Rhodian, said, that to be without pain was the chief good**, so great an evil did pain appear to him to be."[3]

**Later in the *Tusculan Disputations* (Book V),** Cicero lists the competing "simple" definitions of the good side by side, naming Epicurus and Hieronymus as two of the four: "'nothing good but pleasure,' as Epicurus maintains: **'nothing good but a freedom from pain,' as Hieronymus asserts**."[4]

**In *De Finibus* (Book II)** — the very dialogue on which the katastematic-supremacy reading is built — Cicero brings up Hieronymus directly against Torquatus, in the same conversation already discussed above regarding "absence of pain" and pleasure. He asks Torquatus why, if Epicurus meant the same thing Hieronymus meant, he did not simply use Hieronymus's term: "if he means the same thing that Hieronymus does, who thinks that the chief good is to live without any annoyance, why does he prefer using the term 'pleasure' rather than freedom from pain, as Hieronymus does, who is quite aware of the force of the words which he employs?"[5] A few pages later Cicero presses the same point even more explicitly, stating plainly that Hieronymus's position and Epicurus's are not the same thing at all: "nor does Hieronymus, who lays it down that freedom from pain is the chief good, ever use the word 'pleasure' for that painlessness, inasmuch as **he never even reckons pleasure at all among the things which are desirable**."[6]

Independent, non-Ciceronian confirmation exists as well: Clement of Alexandria, in the *Stromateis* (Book II, Chapter 21, sections 127-128), records the same ancient division of philosophical schools by their stated goals, placing Epicurus in the category of philosophers who named pleasure as the end and Hieronymus in the separate category of those who named freedom from pain as the end. This matters because Clement's testimony does not come from Cicero's dialogues or from the same rhetorical context at all – it is an independent tradition arriving at the identical classification.

The logical structure of this evidence is what makes it decisive. Cicero was not confused, careless, or working from secondhand rumor about what "freedom from pain as the supreme good, with pleasure excluded" actually sounds like when a philosopher genuinely holds it. Cicero had Hieronymus sitting right there in the historical record as his working example, and he cites him by name, repeatedly, across three different works, specifically to make the contrast vivid. If Epicurus's real position were what the katastematic-supremacy reading claims – that "absence of pain" is a separate, superior good and pleasure a secondary, tolerated one – then Epicurus's position and Hieronymus's would be the same position, and Cicero's own favorite rhetorical weapon against Epicurus (repeatedly holding up Hieronymus as the philosopher who says the same thing correctly and consistently) would make no sense. You cannot fault someone for failing to

be as clear and consistent as a rival philosopher if that rival philosopher secretly holds your subject's own true position. Cicero's argument only works, on its own terms, if he understood Epicurus and Hieronymus to be saying two genuinely different things – which means Cicero himself, however hostile a witness, did not take Epicurus's actual claim to be the katastematic-supremacy position at all. His charge was that Epicurus muddled a single word ("pleasure") to cover two things that Hieronymus, more consistently, kept separate and named honestly. That is a charge of poor terminology, not a report that Epicurus secretly agreed with Hieronymus about what the good actually is.

One further point deserves mention. Hieronymus came *after* Epicurus and had access to his writings. If "absence of pain, to the exclusion of pleasure" really were Epicurus's own considered position, Hieronymus's entire philosophical contribution collapses into restating, more baldly, something Epicurus had already said – and no ancient source treats it that way. Instead, the sources treat Hieronymus as staking out his *own* distinct position, one later and different from Epicurus's, not as a mere clarification of it. The ancient world drew this line carefully and repeatedly. Modern readers who attribute the katastematic-supremacy view to Epicurus are, in effect, quietly handing him Hieronymus's position instead of Epicurus's own – exactly the error this article, and the editorial policy explained at its close, exists to correct.

## Why The Place of Pleasure Matters

This is not a narrow philological quarrel over the fine print of a single Greek adjective. The katastematic-supremacy reading is the technical hinge on which a much larger and more consequential distortion turns: the claim, repeated across centuries and still dominant today, that Epicurus's real goal was not pleasure at all but *tranquility*. Once a reader accepts that Epicurus quietly ranked a separate, non-sensory "static" pleasure above the ordinary pleasures of taste, friendship, sex, and delight, the door is open to treating that static condition as something categorically different from pleasure as anyone actually experiences it – and from there it is a short step to renaming it "ataraxia," then "tranquility," then "equanimity" or in more modern terms as "relief from pain" or "homeostasis" – until the word pleasure itself quietly disappears from the account and Epicurus has been rebuilt, feature by feature, into a Stoic or a Buddhist wearing a Garden

name tag. Tracing the actual textual history of this specific error – who first read Cicero's Torquatus as establishing a hierarchy rather than a unity, and **why** – is therefore not a detour from the ethical question of what Epicurus actually taught about how to live.

The historical record shows that strong motivation existed to rewrite Epicurus long before modern commentators gave the katastematic-supremacy reading its current academic respectability. Lorenzo Valla's 1431 dialogue *On Pleasure* and, later, Pierre Gassendi's seventeenth-century Catholic revival of Epicureanism (popularized in English by François Bernier) both tried to reconcile a philosophy of pleasure with Christian asceticism, and both found their opening in exactly this argument: elevate "absence of pain" into a separate, higher, more respectable category, detach it from the pleasures of the body and the senses, and rename it something closer to "peace of mind." Tellingly, the sources least infected by this move – Cosma Raimondi's frank Renaissance defense of Epicurus, or Frances Wright's 1822 Benthamite popularization – are precisely the ones with no theological or Stoic motive to launder pleasure into tranquility. The pattern holds from antiquity to the present: *wherever a commentator has an independent reason to prefer a philosophy of calm withdrawal over a philosophy of active pleasure*, the katastematic / kinetic distinction is trotted out to be led around like a pony at a circus as a tool that gets them where they want to go.

The cost of this misreading is not simply rhetorical. If "absence of pain" names a separate and superior good, detached from the ordinary pleasures Epicurus spent his life defending, then a life of minimalism, resignation, and withdrawal from active engagement with food, sex, friendship, and the senses becomes not just compatible with Epicureanism but its *most consistent* expression. This is exactly backwards from how Epicurus's own students lived, how Torquatus describes the goal in Cicero's own dialogue ("numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind"), and how Diogenes of Oinoanda summarized his life's work on his dying stone inscription: not a retreat from pleasure but "a fine anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure."[7] Restoring the single-good reading defended in this article – pleasure as one thing, described from the angle of its cause (kinetic), its limit (aponia), and its resulting condition (katastema), rather than two things ranked in a hierarchy – is what closes off this misreading at its technical source rather than merely contesting its conclusions.

This is also why the point connects directly to Principal Doctrines 3 and 18, which state that pleasure has a limit, reached when all pain is removed, beyond which pleasure can vary but not increase. Seen through the katastematic-supremacy lens, that limit looks like a ceiling on ordinary pleasure in favor of something else, quieter and higher. Seen correctly – as the completed result of pleasure, not a rival category – the limit is not a demotion of pleasure but its completion: a *full* cup, not an *empty* one. Getting the katastematic/kinetic question right is what makes it possible to see Epicurus's doctrine of the limit of pleasure as the triumphant answer it was meant to be, rather than the quiet retreat generations of readers have been misled into accepting.

## Why the Katastematic Supremacy View Doesn't Work

Gosling and Taylor begin by cataloguing the inconsistencies the katastematic emphasis forces onto Epicurus. Four problems in particular have no good answer if kinetic and katastematic pleasure really are two separate kinds, one of them the true good and the other a secondary, almost dispensable class:

1. **The emphasis on sensory pleasure becomes inexplicable.** If the real good is the non-sensory state of aponia/ataraxia, why does Epicurus talk as though sensory pleasure matters enormously — going so far as to say, in a passage Cicero himself quotes, that he cannot conceive of the good at all once the pleasures of taste, sex, and hearing are subtracted?
2. **The senses are supposed to be the criterion of the good**, yet it is easy to see how a sensory pleasure is directly given in perception and hard to see how an abstract state like absence of disturbance or absence of pain could be perceived in the same way. If katastematic pleasure is a different, non-sensory kind of good, Epicurus's own epistemology makes it strangely inaccessible to the very faculty he says reveals the good.
3. **The "cheating" charge.** If aponia and ataraxia are purely negative — mere absences of pain and disturbance — then Epicurus looks like he is quietly switching the meaning of "pleasure" mid-argument: an ordinary sense some of the time and a stretched technical sense at other times. If true, this would validate the claim Cicero made of him that Epicurus was being inconsistent and illogical.

4. **A living thing without any sensory pleasure at all would, on Epicurus's own physics, have no perception and therefore no life.** It is odd to imagine a "pure katastematic" state entirely detached from sensation, as the katastematic-supremacy reading seems to require.

None of these problems arise from any ambiguity in Epicurus's actual words about pleasure being good — they arise specifically from the assumption that he meant two different *kinds* of pleasure, standing in a hierarchy, rather than one unified good described from different angles.

## Pleasure Is A Single Good Described In Two Ways

Gosling and Taylor's proposed alternative is that Epicurus never intended a division into competing kinds at all. **Aponia is simply the condition of having sensory pleasure with no pain mixed in. Ataraxia is the confident, well-founded expectation that this painless pleasant condition will continue** — a confidence secured by true beliefs about death, the gods, and the limits of desire, rather than by superstitious anxiety. On this reading, "katastematic pleasure" is not a separate, non-sensory good standing above sensory pleasure; it is sensory pleasure itself, considered under the aspect of being secure and undisturbed. The body supplies pleasure-without-pain; the mind supplies confident memory and expectation that this same condition will hold. These are not two rival goods in competition — they are two descriptions of one and the same good life.

This position dissolves all four objections at once. Sensory pleasure keeps the central importance Epicurus clearly gives it. It remains something perception directly reveals, since aponia just names painless perception itself. "Pleasure" is not being used in two conflicting senses, and there is no need to imagine a pleasure-without-perception state, since aponia was never meant to describe one.

If this is right, what is left to call "kinetic"? Gosling and Taylor answer that kinetic pleasure was meant to refer simply to the *process* of moving toward the goal of a painless condition — the pleasure of drinking while still thirsty, as against the pleasure of having drunk and being thirst-free. It is not a different kind of pleasure, only the same phenomenon viewed as a transition rather than as an achieved state. Epicurus would have had little theoretical reason to make a great deal of this distinction, except in specific polemical contexts where an opponent

forced the issue – the question of whether pleasure can be said to have a "limit" — which is exactly the pattern the ancient evidence shows.

## Which Interpretation Best Fits The Sources?

The most persuasive ancient sources strongly support the single-good reading. **Lucretius** and **Plutarch** — in the latter's case, in a dialogue expressly devoted to attacking the Epicurean life as unlivable — both discuss Epicurean pleasure at length. Neither shows the slightest sign of treating a kinetic / katastematic contrast as an important, well-known Epicurean doctrine. If the distinction had really been central to Epicurean theory, it is hard to believe both authors would have passed over it in total silence, especially since Plutarch, like Cicero, was actively hunting for weaknesses to exploit.

**Cicero** is the one major source for the rigid two-kinds reading, and he is also demonstrably not an honest guide to it. He is an unsympathetic critic explicitly trying to catch Epicurus in inconsistency, and he cannot even keep his own account of "motion" straight. In one passage motion means a change in the organism's state (thirsty to not-thirsty), and in another it means physical motion in the sense organs themselves (the pleasures of taste, sound, and sight).[1] If kinetic pleasure were a stable, well-defined Epicurean technical term, its chief ancient reporter should not be equivocating about what it even refers to. Nikolsky's independent analysis of Cicero's text, discussed below, reaches the same diagnosis from the Latin itself.

**Diogenes Laertius X.136** is the passage most often treated as decisive, since it appears to quote Epicurus's own words distinguishing katastematic from kinetic

pleasure. But the text is compressed and difficult, and both Gosling and Taylor and, independently, Nikolsky argue that its most natural reading does not require two competing kinds at all — a point developed fully below.

Finally, one might object that the Cyrenaics' known rejection of aponia as a pleasure at all (they compared it to the condition of a sleeping person) shows that contemporaries close to the debate understood Epicurus to be making exactly the two-kinds claim. But there is no real evidence the Cyrenaic position was formulated specifically against Epicurus, no evidence the Cyrenaics were careful or sympathetic readers of him, and independent reason — via Epicurus's own teachers Nausiphanes and Pamphilus — to think his actual target in this discussion was debates already current in the Academy, not the Cyrenaics at all.

Gosling and Taylor's reading has not remained an isolated position from 1982. Emily Austin, in *Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life* (2022) – a book aimed explicitly at general readers, exactly the audience most exposed to the popular tranquility-centered misreading this article addresses – notes in a footnote that she has deliberately chosen not to relitigate the katastematic/kinetic dispute in her main text, but that "a specialist will recognize" she is "adopting a view roughly in line with Gosling and Taylor (1982) and Arenson (2019)."[8] On her reading, "katastematic pleasures are sensory pleasures that issue from confidence in one's ability to satisfy one's necessary desires and an awareness of one's healthy psychological functioning," while "choice-worthy kinetic pleasures are the various pleasures consistent with maintaining healthy functioning" – pleasures which vary but do not increase functioning beyond it.

1. The two passages are both from Cicero's *De Finibus*, Book II, in the course of Cicero's own cross-examination of Torquatus. The first passage uses "motion" to describe sensory pleasure generally, the pleasures of taste, sound, and sight among them: "Because all men feel that this is pleasure which moves the senses when they receive it... [Epicurus] declares that he is unable even to understand where it is, or what any good is, except that which is enjoyed by the instrumentality of meat or drink, or the pleasure of the ears, or sensual enjoyment... for all men call that pleasing motion by which the senses are rendered cheerful, ἡδονή in Greek, and *voluptas* in Latin" (*De Fin.* II.6-7, Yonge translation). Only a few lines later, in the same conversation, Cicero uses "motion" in an entirely different sense, to mean a change in the organism's own state from thirst to the removal of thirst: "Is there, now, said I, any pleasure felt by a thirsty man in drinking?... Is it, asked I, the same pleasure that he feels after his thirst is extinguished? It is, replied he, another kind of pleasure; for the state of extinguished thirst has in it a certain stability of pleasure, but the pleasure of extinguishing it is pleasure in motion" (*De Fin.* II.9, Yonge translation).

The Arenson citation traces to her book, *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus* (2019). In her introduction, Arenson discusses why she sets aside much of Cicero's testimony on Epicurean pleasure. Arenson writes that her thinking "has been influenced by the work of J. C. B. Gosling and C. C. W. Taylor (1982) and Boris Nikolsky (2001)," whom she describes as "the minority of scholars who understand Epicurus' conception of pleasure independently of Cicero's testimony," and states in her own words: **"I share their position that what counts as properly kinetic according to Epicureans is the pleasure linked to the perceived process of restoring painless organic functioning, whereas what counts as katastematic is the awareness of the organism's painless functioning."**[9] She adds that she is "somewhat sympathetic" to Nikolsky's interpretation specifically, and has "followed Nikolsky's lead in looking to the debates within the Platonic Academy" for insight into Epicurean hedonism – an independent scholar arriving, by her own account, at something close to the same trail Nikolsky blazed from Carneades' Academy through to Cicero.[10] Arenson goes on to build her own further account on this shared foundation (including an argument that certain pleasures usually classified as kinetic, such as taste and sex, are better classified as katastematic), and is careful to say her book is not meant as "a defense of all their views."[11] But on the specific point relevant here – that kinetic and katastematic are not two competing, hierarchically ranked kinds of pleasure but two different descriptions of a single underlying phenomenon – she states her agreement with Gosling and Taylor plainly and in her own voice.

This is independent confirmation, decades after Gosling and Taylor's original argument and from a scholar working the primary texts herself rather than relying on secondhand summary. Although a minority, there are sound academic specialists in Epicurean ethics who regard the single-good reading defended in this article as the sounder one – including, as noted above, at least one author writing for a popular, non-specialist audience, who judged it better to build quietly on that minority position than to repeat centuries of error that stand in the way of a better understanding of Epicurus.

Arenson's book also independently confirms the practical stakes with which this article opened. She names the "passive, withdrawn Epicurus" danger explicitly, as a problem the traditional kinetic/katastematic reading creates rather than

solves. Describing kinetic pleasure as "active stimulation" or "active employment of one's bodily and mental faculties," she observes that this makes katastematic pleasure "seem all the more lifeless in comparison," and asks the question directly: "How would Epicureans dodge the charge that their best life resembles the state of a corpse?" (p. 140).[12] She traces this same worry back to her book's opening pages, where she frames it as one of the central problems Epicurean scholarship has to solve: Epicureans need "a robust response to the Cyrenaic criticism that the Epicurean good resembles the state of a corpse: dead bodies might be painless, but they certainly are not enjoying health" (p. 3).[13] Her own resolution runs in the same direction as the argument made throughout this article: katastematic pleasure is not an inert absence but the perceived, positively enjoyed condition of an organism functioning in health – something a corpse, lacking all perception, categorically cannot have. This is an independent scholarly confirmation, in a specialist's own words, of exactly the danger this article warns against. Read the kinetic/katastematic distinction as a hierarchy with a bare, passive absence-of-pain at its summit, and Epicurus starts to sound indistinguishable from a corpse – rather than the advocate of a full, actively pleasurable life the primary sources actually describe.

## Nikolsky: The Same Conclusion By a Different Route

Writing nearly twenty years after Gosling and Taylor, Boris Nikolsky pushes their skepticism about the supremacy of katastematic pleasure further. Where Gosling and Taylor still preserve something like a functional two-sided distinction — a bodily condition (aponia) and a mental confidence about it (ataraxia) — Nikolsky argues that Epicurus never focused on classifying pleasure into kinds as a matter of real importance, and that the entire "kinetic versus katastematic" framework is an artifact of later teachings that can be traced to a specific, identifiable source.

Nikolsky's method mirrors Gosling and Taylor's in spirit: he treats Epicurus's own writings, Lucretius, and Plutarch as the reliable core of evidence, and treats Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, and Athenaeus — the only authors who actually assert a division into two kinds — as a separate group whose testimony needs to be explained rather than simply accepted. His first argument is the same one just noted: Cicero cannot hold "kinetic pleasure" to one consistent meaning across

his own text, which is itself evidence that no such stable technical category existed for him to report accurately.

Nikolsky's more original contribution is a positive account of what Epicurus's technical vocabulary was actually doing. Greek philosophy before Epicurus — Empedocles, Plato's *Timaeus*, and later Aristotle and the Peripatetics — had long analyzed pleasure as *katastasis*, restoration of the organism to its natural state. Anti-hedonists, including Plato in the *Philebus* and probably Speusippus, used this analysis to argue that pleasure cannot be the good: if pleasure is merely a *process* of restoration, then the real end is the resulting neutral state, not the process itself, and so something other than pleasure (for Plato, a kind of measure or limit; for the Academy generally, virtue) must be the true good. Nikolsky proposes that Epicurus's choice of the similar but distinct term *katastema* — rather than the Academy's own *katastasis* – is an answer to exactly this argument. *Katastema* denotes the *result* of restoration rather than the process, which let Epicurus fold both the process and the state it produces into a single, unified pleasure, blocking the Academic objection at its root rather than conceding that pleasure is mere becoming. On this reading, aponia is not a separate, third, oddly "neutral" kind of pleasure at all. It is simply the characteristic that marks the *limit* on the magnitude of any pleasure whatsoever — matching Principal Doctrine 3's statement that "the removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures" — a description that applies across the board, not a special static category set against a kinetic one.[14]

By the same logic, where Epicurus and Plutarch use "motion" language, they are describing the physical, atomic mechanism of pleasure in general — the impact of external atoms upon the organism — not marking off one distinct class of pleasures as "kinetic" against a separate "static" class. A single pleasure can correctly be called a motion (describing its physical cause), an absence of pain (describing its limiting magnitude), and a *katastema* (describing the resulting condition of the organism) — three descriptive angles on one phenomenon, not three, or even two, competing phenomena.

This reframing lets Nikolsky offer a cleaner reading of Diogenes Laertius X.136 than either the pro-katastematic interpreters or, in a different way, Gosling and Taylor themselves propose. Rather than classifying two *kinds* of pleasure, Nikol-

sky argues, the passage describes two coexisting *aspects* of any pleasure: a passive aspect — a state of the body or mind, named by aponia and ataraxia — and an active aspect — an emotional response to that state, named by *chara* (joy) and *euphrosyne* (well-being), and described with the word *energeia* (activity). This resolves two puzzles that the traditional reading cannot: why the passage calls only pleasures of the soul "kinetic" (because *energeia* specifically names the soul's active response, not a rival sensory category), and what *energeia* is doing in the sentence in the first place (marking the active side of the very same state whose passive side is aponia and ataraxia). Nikolsky supports this with Plutarch's own habit of pairing aponia/ataraxia with chara/euphrosyne as two sides of a single thing, never as opposed alternatives — and situates the whole framework against the Peripatetic debate over *katastasis* versus *energeia*, in which Aristotle and the author of the *Magna Moralia* had already discussed bodily restoration and the soul's active enjoyment of it as two aspects of one pleasure-event, precisely the model Epicurus adapts and then pushes further by insisting that the bodily state of restoration itself, not merely the soul's active enjoyment of it, also counts as genuine pleasure.

Nikolsky also dissolves what looks like Epicurus's most damaging apparent contradiction: the passage, quoted by both Cicero and Athenaeus, where Epicurus says he cannot conceive of the good apart from the pleasures of taste, sex, hearing, and sight — offered by both authors as proof that Epicurus inconsistently calls kinetic pleasure the supreme good when he elsewhere calls static pleasure supreme. Both authors, Nikolsky observes, quote only part of the passage. The fuller version, preserved by Cicero himself elsewhere in the *Tusculan Disputations*, shows Epicurus explicitly linking these sensory pleasures together with freedom from pain as a single, unified conception of the good — not opposing one to the other. The contradiction is an artifact of selective quotation, not a real inconsistency in Epicurus's own thought.

## Where the Error May Well Have Originated

Nikolsky's most distinctive contribution is not just a better reading of the evidence but an account of how the mistaken tradition may have originated in the first place. He traces the "two kinds of pleasure" doctrine to the *divisio Carneadea* — a classification scheme devised in the Hellenistic Academy, associ-

ated with Carneades and his successors, that catalogued rival philosophical theories of the highest good using a thesis–antithesis–synthesis structure for teaching purposes.[15] In that scheme, the Cyrenaics were filed under "pleasure in motion," other philosophers who held painlessness to be the good were filed under "absence of pain," and Epicurus was then mechanically classified as *synthesizing* the two — producing an artificial doctrine of two kinds of pleasure attributed to him that reflects the Academy's own naming convenience rather than his actual position. Nikolsky traces this scheme's transmission through Antiochus of Ascalon into Cicero, whose four-part treatment of Epicurean ethics in *De Finibus* Book I mirrors Antiochus's own four-part analytical framework point for point, and, independently but from the same underlying Academic tradition, into the structure of Diogenes Laertius's overview of Epicurean ethics in Book 10. This is the crucial point: Cicero's and Diogenes's apparent agreement on the classification is not independent corroboration at all. Both descend from the same single source, transmitted along two different paths from the same Academic tradition. Diogenes Laertius had no reason to attack Epicurus and so cites it matter-of-factly as uncontroversial. In contrast, Cicero – in his own mind – had every reason to attack Epicurus, so he attempts to turn a useful distinction into a damaging contradiction.

## Conclusion - Pleasure Is A Single Unified Concept Viewable From Multiple Perspectives

Two independent lines of argument, separated by two decades of scholarship and reaching their conclusions by different routes, converge on the same result. Epicurus did not teach that pleasure comes in two kinds standing in a hierarchy, one merely tolerated and the other alone truly good. Gosling and Taylor show that the traditional reading generates avoidable, artificial problems, and that the ancient sources most likely to know better — Lucretius and Plutarch — show no sign the distinction mattered to Epicurean theory at all. Nikolsky goes further, showing not only that the classification lacks good evidence but where the bad evidence actually came from: a scholastic naming convention invented in the Academy for comparing rival schools, mistakenly transferred back into Epicurus's own words by Cicero and, by a separate route from the same source, by Diogenes Laertius.

What remains, once the traditional hierarchy is cleared away, is a simpler and more consistent picture. Pleasure is the supreme good — one good, not two. *Hedone*, *kinesis*, *aponia*, and *eustathes katastema* are different terms describing different characteristics of a single phenomenon: an external influence acting on the organism and bringing it into its natural, painless state. Aponia names the limit that gives pleasure its maximum magnitude; kinesis names its physical, atomic mechanism; katastema names the resulting condition of the organism experiencing it. None of these terms mark off a separate, superior kind of pleasure set against an inferior one. Epicurus's insistence that sensory pleasure matters immensely, and his simultaneous insistence that the complete absence of pain is the greatest pleasure there is, were never in tension to begin with — they are two descriptions from different perspectives of the very same supreme good.

## The Editorial Policy at EpicureanFriends.com

Having traced the argument to this conclusion, a practical question remains: how much further debate about it belongs at EpicureanFriends. The debate is old, technical, and – as the history traced above shows – it has repeatedly proven to be exactly the kind of debate that those with a Stoic, Buddhist, or ascetic agenda can use, whether deliberately or not, to consume disproportionate attention by relitigating a question that should never have arisen. That overconsumption of time is a cost EpicureanFriends is not willing to pay. A community dedicated to the study and promotion of Epicurus cannot allow one dubious but recurring argument, whatever its pedigree, to crowd out the far larger body of work still to be done in the study and promotion of the philosophy as a whole. Likewise we cannot allow that argument to be used, yet again, as the mechanism by which the philosophy is converted into its own opposite.

Good-faith discussion of the katastematic/kinetic question is therefore welcome here, but only within real limits. Posts that simply restate the katastematic-supremacy position, or that use it as a wedge to reintroduce tranquility, equanimity, asceticism, minimalism or even the term "absence of pain" as some good superior to and distinct from pleasure, will be moderated closely depending on their character. Neutral or exploratory posts on the topic that are not themselves advocacy for the position adopted here will be strictly limited in number and scope. The appropriate response to such posts in most cases will be citation to

this article or to the many prior discussions we have held on the subject. This ground has already been thoroughly covered and re-covered, and repeating it endlessly serves no legitimate purpose. Posts that constitute active advocacy against the editorial position set out in this article – posts that argue, in effect, that Epicurus really did rank a separate katastematic good above ordinary pleasure, or that his true goal was tranquility rather than pleasure – will be heavily moderated or removed outright. Posters who persist in advocating that position will have their participation on the forum limited or terminated.

This is not a judgment made lightly or without regard for open inquiry. It is a judgment about proportion. There are too many extremely important and unfinished tasks in the study and promotion of Epicurean philosophy – and too many people to help – for this argument to be allowed to consume attention that belongs elsewhere. At EpicureanFriends the advocacy of katastematic supremacy has reached its final dead end.

Epicurus built pleasure as a single house, not two rooms at war.

## Notes

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→ *Notes for this article*

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# Tranquillism: A Century of Scholars Looking For Epicurus' Supreme Good Anywhere But Pleasure

**Status note:** This article is a working draft. Every citation below is being verified against a primary source. But the list itself is far from complete: if anything it *understates* the severity of the problem. More entries and additional details will be added over time as further research is done. This is a very large project, and if anyone sees errors or would suggest updates to classifications of writers or other changes, please contact Cassius at EpicureanFriends.com.



## Introduction

Ask most people who have read a single article about Epicurus what his philosophy is actually about, and a surprising number will say some version of "tranquility." Not pleasure – tranquility, or its Greek name, *ataraxia*: freedom from mental disturbance. In the more technical literature the same substitution often appears under a different name: "katastematic" or "static" pleasure, treated not merely as one flavor of pleasure among others but as a separate, ranked-supreme category standing above pleasure in general.

A more extreme, entirely parallel version of the same argument is that katastematic pleasure deserves that supreme rank precisely *because* it is non-sensory – a cognitive recognition arrived at "upon reflection" rather than something directly felt, in contrast to kinetic pleasure, which is. Whichever label or justification is used – ataraxia, tranquility, katastematic pleasure, static pleasure, or katastematic

pleasure elevated specifically for being unfelt – the underlying result is the same: naming something *other than pleasure plain and simple* as the thing Epicurus actually recommended.

This is not a fringe misunderstanding confined to casual blog posts and careless YouTube videos. It runs through encyclopedia entries, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and monographs published by serious scholars who have spent careers on Hellenistic philosophy. Some of them say it in passing. Some of them say it as the explicit thesis of an entire paper. A few say it so plainly that they propose replacing "hedonist" with a new word entirely.

The pattern is not hard to see once it is documented: whenever a commentator has an independent reason to prefer a philosophy of calm withdrawal over a philosophy of active pleasure – whether the motive traces to Stoicism, supernatural religion, Buddhism, Skepticism, Humanism, or simply a modern discomfort with pleasure as a serious philosophical category – naming the goal as ataraxia, tranquility, or katastematic pleasure rather than pleasure plain and simple is the way they get there. What this article does is collect quotations from specific people who have made this substitution under any of its names whether in academic scholarship or generalist publications. Also included for contrast, in the final section, is a listing of the smaller number of scholars who have pushed back directly against it.

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## Part One: Academic and Reference Sources

Ordered by editorial priority rather than alphabetically or chronologically: Nussbaum, Warren, and O'Keefe are placed first because their books are the most widely read and cited.

### Martha C. Nussbaum

Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 1994) is among the most widely read and frequently cited books on Hellenistic ethics in print. In Chapter 4, "Epicurean Surgery: Argument and Empty Desire," p. 109, discussing what Epicurus's own "cradle ar-

gument" (the appeal to the observed behavior of infants and animals) is meant to establish, Nussbaum writes:[1]

> "Ataraxia (freedom from disturbance and anxiety) in the soul and freedom from pain in the body: these are the uncorrupted creature's goals."[2]

This is not a translation of Epicurus's own words – it is Nussbaum's own summary conclusion, naming ataraxia and freedom from pain, not pleasure, as what the argument establishes as the goal. She frames the entire chapter around the same premise, opening it by arguing that for Epicurus philosophy's "only proper task" is "the relief of human misery" – casting the whole of Epicurean ethics as a therapeutic project aimed at removing disturbance, with the pursuit of pleasure folded into that framework rather than standing as the positive, independent goal in its own right.[3] She is careful and qualifies her claims throughout (she explicitly rejects reading ataraxia as "a zero state, a state of stagnant inactivity") – but the conclusion she reaches, in her own words, is that ataraxia and freedom from pain, not pleasure, are what the argument is actually shown to establish.[4]

**James Warren**

Warren's *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia* (Cambridge Classical Studies, Cambridge University Press, 2002) states, in its introduction (p. 5):[5]

> "...the Epicureans and the Sextan Pyrrhonists, despite their other differences, promote something which they call ataraxia as the goal of life."[6]

A page earlier, Warren had written that "the goal of life – if you are an Epicurean – is the pursuit of pleasure, understood to be the absence of physical and mental pain."[7] Warren moves between both framings without drawing a sharp line between them – which is exactly what Jeffrey Purinton's own review of the book, in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2002.10.01), criticizes him for: Purinton writes that Warren "ends up saying surprisingly little about how Epicurus' own distinctive view of the *telos* grew out of Democritean ethics," faulting the book for imprecision on this exact point.[8]

The same pattern recurs in a later book. In *Facing Death: Epicurus and His Critics* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 147, discussing Philodemus's comparison of a young and an old man, Warren writes in his own analytical voice: "What

matters, therefore, in assessing the goodness of a life is clearly not at all how long that life is but rather whether the person in question has attained the natural goal of life, the absence of pain."[9] This is a second, independent data point (a different book, two years later) for the same equivocation as to the status of pleasure.

### Tim O'Keefe

O'Keefe makes the same claim, in slightly different words, across at least three separate publications spanning fifteen years.

In his book *Epicureanism* (Acumen / University of California Press, 2010), p. 120:

> "And this combination of aponia and ataraxia – with ataraxia being by far the more important of the two – is the pinnacle of happiness. Epicurus is properly called a hedonist, since he avows that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good. But given his idiosyncratic understanding of pleasure, with ataraxia being the primary constituent of the happy life, it may be less misleading to call him a 'tranquillist'."[10]

(This same passage is quoted by Wikipedia's "Epicureanism" article – see the Major Reference Works section below.) Elsewhere in the same book, p. 144, discussing Epicurus's response to the Ring of Gyges thought experiment:

> "And because tranquillity is the main constituent of the happy life for Epicurus, having to live in fear of punishment is reason enough never to break the law..."[11]

In "Achieving Tranquility: Epicurus on Living without Fear," a chapter written for *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy* (ed. Jacob Klein and Nathan Powers, Oxford University Press, 2025, pp. 184-202):[12]

> "Given this pair of distinctions, the Epicureans maintain that the main constituent of the pleasant life, and hence, of the happy life, is the static mental pleasure of ataraxia, or tranquility – the state of being free from mental disturbance. So while it is accurate to call the Epicureans hedonists, it might be less misleading to say that they are 'tranquillists.'"[13]

And in his entry on "Epicurus" for the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, read by a far larger general audience than either of the works above:

> "He taught that the point of all one's actions was to attain pleasure (conceived of as tranquility) for oneself, and that this could be done by limiting one's desires and by banishing the fear of the gods and of death."[14]

O'Keefe is not a marginal figure making an offhand remark. He is proposing that "tranquillist" is a more accurate label for Epicurus than "hedonist" – which is to say, that tranquility, not pleasure, is the better name for what Epicurus actually recommended.

### David Konstan

Konstan (Brown University / New York University) wrote the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Epicurus," a widely-noted source:

> "...a view of the goal of human life (happiness, resulting from absence of physical pain and mental disturbance)."[15]

> "...the absence of such fear is ataraxy, lack of perturbation, and ataraxy, together with freedom from physical pain, is one way of specifying the goal of life, for Epicurus."[16]

### Jeffrey Purinton

Purinton's "Epicurus on the Telos," published in *Phronesis* 38, no. 3 (1993): 281-320, is one of the more sustained academic arguments against considering pleasure as the goal.[17] On p. 281, near the paper's opening:

> "It follows, then, that, when Epicurus says that pleasure is the telos, what he means is that the telos is specifically what he calls 'katastematic pleasure': painlessness (the katastematic pleasure of the body) and undisturbedness (the katastematic pleasure of the soul)."[18]

Purinton goes further than most, and represents a distinct, more extreme view: not just naming katastematic pleasure as the telos, but arguing that it is elevated above kinetic pleasure precisely *because* it is non-sensory – a cognitive recognition rather than a felt experience. On p. 301:

> "...unlike kinetic pleasure, which is directly sensed to be good, painlessness is only recognized to be good upon reflection: one must remember that one was in pain, think about the fact that the absence of what was bad is good, and be grateful for the fact that what was bad is absent."[19]

And a few lines earlier, on the same page: "the flesh does not report that this painless state is good."[20] This is worth flagging explicitly because it inverts the ordinary meaning of "pleasure" rather than merely relocating it: kinetic pleasure is "directly sensed," while katastematic pleasure – the thing Purinton calls the *telos* – is arrived at only "upon reflection," through memory and gratitude rather than sensation.[21] Something that is not directly felt at all is nonetheless being named the supreme good, in a philosophy whose own vocabulary ties "good" to "feeling." Epicurus's own words, quoted directly in Catherine Wilson's entry in Part Three below, are "we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing."[22] Mathew Wenham's entry in Part Three below directly challenges this specific "non-sensory" framing, which Gosling and Taylor had already identified as a "reflection, not direct sensation" reading in 1982.[23]

Purinton is not inventing this reading from nothing. Cicero's *De Finibus* is where Wenham and others locate its origin – Cicero states flatly that "Epicurus holds the highest pleasure to be to feel no pain" (quoted via Splawn, who cites *De Finibus* directly).[24] And the same equivalence – painlessness simply *is* the greatest pleasure, with no further felt quality required – reappears in one of the most widely used reference works: A.A. Long and David Sedley's *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 122-123:

> "If complete absence of bodily and mental pain constitutes the greatest pleasure, then it is only reasonable to avoid any pleasures which will imperil this objective... As long as pain is absent we have static pleasure, but kinetic pleasure will last only as long as the activity giving rise to it."[25]

Long and Sedley are not making the "non-sensory" argument as explicitly as Purinton does, but the formulation itself performs the same equivalence: static pleasure simply *is* the state of pain being absent, full stop, with nothing said about whether that state is itself felt or experienced in the way kinetic pleasure is.

### Yosef Z. Liebersohn

Liebersohn, writing in the peer-reviewed journal *Elenchos* 36, no. 2 (2015): 271-297, in "Epicurus' 'Kinetic' and 'Katastematic' Pleasures: A Reappraisal," states in the paper's own abstract, p. 271:

> "...the removal of pain is a necessary condition for the Epicurean goal of ataraxia and aponia..."[26]

### Voula Tsouna

Tsouna (University of California, Santa Barbara) has written in *The Ethics of Philodemus* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 18:

> "Another controversy within the Epicurean school concerns the ways in which it is possible to secure the most important aspect of the supreme good: i.e., tranquillity."[27]

In a separate piece, however, her review of David Konstan's *A Life Worthy of the Gods* for the *American Journal of Philology,* Tsouna criticizes Konstan for "the overemphasis on the static pleasure of the sage at the expense of the kinetic pleasures which he also surely experiences."[28] The two positions can be reconciled, but only if we are clear that the absence of pain IS pleasure, and not leave that conclusion unstated and unexplained.

### Stephen E. Rosenbaum

In Rosenbaum's "Epicurus on Pleasure and the Complete Life," *The Monist* 73, no. 1 (January 1990): 21-41, he wrote:[29]

> "The highest good, for Epicurus, is static pleasure, and it is further the absence of pain – aponia/ataraxia."[30]

He continues immediately: "This makes it clear that Epicurus was not basically advocating a life of sensual delights, and one may hypothesize that many of the misunderstandings of his hedonism developed without a clear view of this crucial distinction."[31] This is the exact statement Alex Gillham's 2018 Purdue dissertation (below) had paraphrased from the same page as "the goal is pleasure, but a specific version of it: tranquility."[32]

Rosenbaum's earlier paper, "How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (April 1986): 217-225, shows him making the same identification four years earlier: "His general philosophical aim seems to have been much the same as that of Lucretius, his disciple, to know the truth and thereby achieve ataraxia," and "Epicurus did have a serious purpose, to establish the truth and thereby gain mental tranquillity and show the way to mental tranquillity" (pp. 220-221).[33]

**Ken Binmore**

Binmore is a distinguished game theorist and philosopher (Fellow of the British Academy, Professor Emeritus at University College London), not an ancient-philosophy specialist by trade – which makes it notable that he wrote an entire book applying and defending an Epicurean framework: *Crooked Thinking or Straight Talk? Modernizing Epicurean Scientific Philosophy* (Springer, 2020). Pp. 8-9:

> "In his old age at least, Epicurus thought that avoiding pain – including painful thoughts and regrets – was much more important than seeking pleasure: that the tranquility to be so derived is a prize beyond measure."[34]

And p. 69, under the subheading "Ignoring pleasure?":

> "We know that he thought avoiding pain more important than seeking pleasure, and so we can model him as preferring lives with better worst outcomes... hence this ideal life will be one of perfect tranquility – the ataraxic life."[35]

Binmore also includes the subheading, "Ignoring pleasure?", which shows he is aware his reading downplays pleasure and is asking the question openly. Binmore also makes a related, more specific claim elsewhere (his earlier paper "Life and Death," *Economics and Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2016): 75-97) that Epicurus valued a life by its *worst* experience rather than by the balance of pleasure over pain across the whole life.

**Alex Voorhoeve**

Voorhoeve (London School of Economics) in "The Pleasures of Tranquillity," *Homo Oeconomicus* 39, no. 2-4 (2022): 185-197 (open access, CC BY 4.0, via LSE's institutional repository), sets out to resolve what he calls "this purported

tension between a life of the greatest pleasures and tranquillity" – and concludes, on the paper's final page, p. 197:[36]

> "I have offered an Epicurean account of the pleasures of tranquillity and their supreme value."[37]

### Phillip Mitsis

Mitsis's *Epicurus' Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, vol. 48 (Cornell University Press, 1988) is frequently cited. Chapter 1, "Pleasure, Happiness, and Desire," is explicit that pleasure is what Epicurus names as the end – p. 44: "we, as adults, come to recognize pleasure as the end" – but the section titled "Pleasure, Ataraxia, and Aponia" (pp. 51-58) consistently states the goal in other terms.[38] P. 51:

> "He further claims that someone who satisfies these desires will be in a state of aponia and ataraxia. In identifying these states with eudaimonia, Epicurus relies on the assertion that a necessary condition for happiness is the satisfaction of our natural and necessary desires."[39]

This is the same "redefinition" register as Warren, Tsouna, and Rosenbaum above – pleasure named as the telos, its actual content supplied by aponia and ataraxia. But Mitsis goes further and states his own conclusion, p. 58, that Epicurus's attempt to identify happiness with aponia and ataraxia "is caught in a dilemma" – pressed on one side by Cicero's charge, on behalf of the Cyrenaics, "that ataraxia is the summum bonum of a corpse" (p. 51), and on the other by a sustained contrast with Hobbes's view that happiness cannot consist in the "repose of a mind satisfied."[40] That conclusion is itself a rejection of pleasure as a workable, self-sufficient goal.

### Carlo Diano

Diano is an early source for this argument. In "Épicure: la philosophie du plaisir et la société des amis" ["Epicurus: The Philosophy of Pleasure and the Society of Friends"], *Les Études philosophiques*, n.s., 22, no. 2 (April-June 1967): 173-186, p. 182, Diano writes:[41]

> "Quand on peut le dire! Mais pour pouvoir le dire, pour entrer dans cette espèce de nirvana vécu les yeux grands ouverts, et se mettre hors du temps et

> vaincre la mort, il faut que l'âme soit libre de toute agitation et de tout désir, de toute jalousie, de tout ressentiment, sereine, en paix avec elle-même et avec le monde. Ainsi, même pour Epicure, on ne peut atteindre le souverain bien qu'à travers la pureté de sa vie et l'ascèse."[42]

> "But to be able to say [I have lived], to enter into this kind of nirvana lived with wide-open eyes, and to place oneself outside time and conquer death, the soul must be free of all agitation and all desire, of all jealousy, of all resentment – serene, at peace with itself and with the world. Thus, even for Epicurus, one can attain the sovereign good only through purity of life and asceticism."[43]

This does not merely name ataraxia or katastematic pleasure in place of pleasure, but reaches for "nirvana" as the closest available analogy, and pairs the Epicurean *summum bonum* with "asceticism," a word standing about as far from ordinary "pleasure" as it is possible to do.[44]

Diano also published *Epicuri Ethica* (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1946) – reviewed by Phillip De Lacy in *Classical Philology* 44, no. 2 (1949): 141. Peter Preuss's account of it, p. 149, describes the same thesis in different technical terms: "Right after the second world war C. Diano in his influential work on Epicurus proposed an interpretation, based on Lucr. 4.627-9, of katastematic pleasure as the condition of the organism free from natural and necessary wants, and of kinetic pleasure as presupposing katastematic pleasure and consisting merely in the variation of it."[45]

### Philip Merlan

Merlan's *Studies in Epicurus and Aristotle*, Klassisch-Philologische Studien 22 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1960), contains the study "Hedone in Epicurus and Aristotle" (pp. 1-37), which opens by stating its whole purpose, p. 1:[46]

> "'Pleasure' (*Lust, plaisir, piacere*) seems to be an entirely adequate translation [of *hedone*]. But is it? In what follows it will be shown that this question should be answered in the negative – at least when the term occurs in Epicurean and in Aristotelian texts... In the form 'hedonism' ... the word *hedone* occurs and any philosophic dictionary is therefore likely to explain hedonism as a doctrine which teaches that pleasure is the *summum bonum*. But should the

> translation of *hedone* by 'pleasure' turn out to be inadequate, the usual definition of hedonism will need some rectification."[47]

By p. 7, working through two kinds of katastematic pleasure (mental and bodily), Merlan ties the mental kind directly to freedom from fear of death and the gods, and generalizes from there:

> "What gives us mental pain is the fear of gods and of death. Once we have learned that there is no reason to be afraid of either, our mind is experiencing the *hedone* of freedom from fear in precisely the same way in which our body is experiencing the *hedone* of health... Mental *hedone* is, if we may say so, the natural condition of the mind, i.e. mind if only left to itself, not attacked by false fears, would experience *hedone*."[48]

On pp. 11-13, Merlan calls Diano's opinion a theory with "much to recommend" it before ultimately finding it "not entirely convincing":

> "As far as kinetic *hedone* of the body is concerned, the translation by 'pleasure' is adequate; it is much less adequate, when *hedone* designates kinetic *hedone* of the mind; it is entirely inadequate, when we speak of katastematic *hedone* either of the mind or of the body. And it is misleading, when the term *hedone* is used in the generic sense of the word, designating both katastematic and kinetic *hedone* either of the mind or of the body."[49]

The study then builds its argument further through a series of passages where Epicurus uses *chara* ("joy") interchangeably with, or as a species of, *hedone*, and closes, p. 15, with Merlan's own explicit conclusion:

> "The philosophy of Epicurus is not a philosophy of pleasure; it is a philosophy of joy."[50]

Merlan does not present this as a settled fact so much as a deliberate rhetorical corrective. On the same page he weighs the case carefully – "'Joy' seems inappropriate when we speak of *hedone* of eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, etc. 'Pleasure' seems inappropriate when we speak of *hedone* of an unperturbed spirit" – and says: "considering the specific historic situation in which we find ourselves and in which the general inclination is to interpret Epicurus' philosophy as one of pleasure, it will be good to counterbalance this inclination by stress on the translation by 'joy.' ... And in the present investigation preference

will be given to the translation by 'joy'" (p. 15).[51] He also grounds the katastematic/*chara* link directly in the text, p. 14, n. 14: "The words *katastema* and *chara* are so closely linked that it is very difficult to imagine that the same Epicurus should elsewhere have said of *chara* that it is limited to kinetic *hedonai*."[52]

The argument extends to the life of the gods. On p. 18 he states: "We therefore find the unambiguous assertion that gods find the source of all their joys within themselves, so that all their joys would be katastematic."[53] And, closing that section: "However, no matter what kind of *hedonai* the Epicurean gods enjoy... again it seems much more appropriate to speak of the life of the gods as being filled with joy rather than pleasure."[54] Merlan goes on, in a following section, to defend "joy" against the objection that it sounds "too spiritual" to cover the full range of *hedone*.[55]

### J.M. Rist

Rist's *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1972) explicitly defends Diano's line of interpretation (above) against Merlan's objections (above). At p. 109 he states in a section titled "The subsidiary role of kinetic pleasure":[56]

> "It is certain that for Epicurus the greatest pleasure is a complete absence of pain, both from the body and from the mind... He will be like a calm sea with no disturbing breezes. But what is the position of all actual human beings, none of whom regularly enjoys such absolute tranquillity?"[57]

Here he states the substitution as settled fact ("It is certain that...") rather than as one interpretation among others.[58]

### Clay Splawn

Splawn, "Updating Epicurus's Concept of Katastematic Pleasure," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2002): 473-482, uses "katastematic pleasure," rather than "ataraxia" or "tranquility," as the name of the elevated, supreme good.[59] In his conclusion, p. 481:

> "The limit of someone's katastematic pleasure, the greatest pleasure possible for a person, would occur when the person takes pleasure in the fact that he is completely free from pain."[60]

### Peter Preuss

Preuss's *Epicurean Ethics: Katastematic Hedonism*, Studies in the History of Philosophy, vol. 35 (Lewiston / Queenston / Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1994) devotes a full chapter ("Kinetic and Katastematic Pleasure," pp. 121-179) to defending the substitution of katastematic pleasure for pleasure because it should be viewed as *continuous*, where kinetic pleasure is inherently intermittent.[61] On p. 166 he writes:

> "Some philosophers, having seen the inadequacy of pursuing kinetic pleasure as the good, abandoned pleasure altogether and recommended something else instead, virtue for example. But Epicurus rather makes katastematic pleasure the good of his ethics because it is continuous in its nature."[62]

He names ataraxia and aponia directly as "prominent example[s] of a katastematic pleasure" (pp. 166-167), and a few pages later, p. 169, quotes Cicero's report of the Epicurean position as "we for our part deem the good life to consist in tranquility of mind."[63]

### Ali Haydar Kutan

Kutan's thesis, "Epicurus and Kant: A Comparison of Their Ethical Systems" (Middle East Technical University, September 2010), p. 124, states:[64]

> "...a tranquil life, (i.e., ataraxia), a state which is free from all kind of bodily and mental disturbances is itself the ultimate goal of life."[65]

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## Part Two: Major Publications and Popular Press

### Neel Burton

Burton, a psychiatrist and author, writes in "The Philosophy of Epicurus," *Psychology Today* (October 2013, updated June 22, 2024):[66]

> "Given the prime importance that he attaches to the avoidance of pain, the elimination of desire, and peace of mind, Epicurus is far more of a 'tranquillist' than a hedonist."[67]

> "Static pleasures, says Epicurus, are better than moving pleasures because they free us from the pain of need or want."[68]

### Maria Karvouni

Karvouni's "The Ultimate Tranquilizer," *Philosophy Now*, Issue 127 (August/September 2018), states the claim as plainly as any entry in this catalog:

> "...*ataraxia* is the goal of life."[69]

> "Epicurus characterized the state of *ataraxia* as the absence of pain and freedom from all worry. He said that the condition in which nothing can discomfort you – whatever that thing is and however distressful it is – can be attained through philosophical contemplation."[70]

### Neel Burton

Burton returns to the subject directly in "What Is Ataraxia?" *Psychology Today* (UK edition, originally published June 2020, updated October 23, 2024):

> "Epicurus... rather than pleasure, emphasized the avoidance of pain, the elimination of desire, and ataraxia."[71]

### Major Reference Works

**Wikipedia**, "Epicureanism" (English-language article, collaboratively edited, consulted 2026-07-19), in the Ethics/Pleasure section, states:

> "The ultimate goal then of Epicurean ethics was to reach a state of *aponia* and *ataraxia*."[72]

This sentence is footnoted directly to Tim O'Keefe's 2010 book *Epicureanism*, p. 120 – meaning Wikipedia's own editorial voice, on one of the internet's single most-read general-reference sources for this topic, has adopted O'Keefe's "tranquillist" framing (see his entry in Part One) as settled fact for its general readership, with no hedge or alternative view presented alongside it.

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## Part Three: Those Who Have Pushed Back Against Replacement of Pleasure as the Supreme Good

A smaller, more recent line of scholarship has argued directly against treating ataraxia or "katastematic pleasure" as a separate, superior good standing above ordinary pleasure.

### J.C.B. Gosling and C.C.W. Taylor

Gosling and Taylor, in *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford, 1982), ch. 19, were among the first to argue systematically that the traditional two-kinds reading generates problems with no good answer. They argue that such reading makes Epicurus's own emphasis on sensory pleasure inexplicable, and that it requires imagining a "pleasure" with no sensory content at all, which Epicurus's own physics rules out. Their own alternative, stated at 19.2.2 (p. 372):[73]

> "The value of ataraxia is parasitic upon that of aponia, since the only ataraxia worth having on Epicurus' view is that which comes from pleasant memories and confident expectations of sensory pleasures of a painless kind."[74]

That is: aponia is a condition of actual sensory pleasure, and ataraxia's value is derivative of it, not a separate, competing kind of good standing above it.

Gosling and Taylor identify, by name, the exact "non-sensory, arrived at by reflection" reading that Purinton (Part One, above) argued eleven years later, tracing it to Cicero.[75] Considering the possibility that Epicurus held katastematic pleasure to be recognized only "when we realize that we are without pain," rather than perceived directly, they write, p. 370:[76]

> "This would... involve reflection on our state, a state quite possibly lacking sensory pleasure... The end of *De Finibus* I.xi does, indeed, provide some evidence that some Epicureans did consider that it was reflection that convinced us that katastematic pleasure is the good, but the same chapter is also evidence that that was not the view of Epicurus himself."[77]

In other words: Gosling and Taylor already knew, in 1982, that a reflection-based, non-sensory reading of katastematic pleasure could be extracted from Cicero's text. They rejected this, treating it as at most a later Epicurean argument

that Cicero chose to preserve. After an extended, chapter-length examination comparing Cicero's testimony against Lucretius's and Plutarch's, they reach their verdict on p. 393:

> "The outcome of all this is that there is no conclusive evidence for the view that all sensory pleasures are kinetic. The only firm evidence is Cicero, and while his testimony is unequivocal we have tried to undermine its claim to reliability."[78]

This means that Gosling and Taylor conclude that katastematic pleasures are sensory as well, and thus are more appropriately classified as part of pleasure rather than some condition or experience superior to or outside of pleasure.

**Mathew Wenham**

Wenham, "On Cicero's Interpretation of 'Katastematic' Pleasure in Epicurus," in *Greek Research in Australia: Proceedings of the Biennial International Conference of Greek Studies, Flinders University, June 2007*, eds. E. Close, G. Couvalis, G. Frazis, M. Palaktsoglou, and M. Tsianikas (Adelaide: Flinders University Department of Languages – Modern Greek, 2009), 109-118, argues against the view that not just that katastematic pleasure is the true goal, but that it is ranked above kinetic pleasure precisely *because* it is non-sensory, as being an unfelt cognitive state rather than an experience.[79] He traces this "standard interpretation" to Cicero and names Jeffrey Purinton (Part One, above) as a direct modern inheritor of it, quoting Purinton's own words that katastematic pleasures "don't feel like anything" (Purinton 1993: 302).[80] Wenham's own position is a rejection of that framing:

> "This framework refuses any conception of pleasure that locates it extrinsically to its experiential object – yet this is just how the standard interpretation casts katastematic pleasures."[81]

Wenham's argument is that Epicurean epistemology itself requires pleasure – of any kind, kinetic or katastematic – to be something felt and experienced, not a cognitive judgment arrived at "extrinsically" to actual sensation. If katastematic pleasure must be an experience like any other, the specific argument for ranking it *above* pleasure generally – that it is superior precisely because it escapes the messiness of felt, sensory experience – collapses.

### Boris Nikolsky

Nikolsky, "Epicurus on Pleasure," *Phronesis* 46, no. 4 (2001): 440-465, goes further than Gosling and Taylor, arguing that the entire "kinetic versus katastematic" framework is a scholastic artifact of the Hellenistic Academy's *divisio Carneadea* – a classification scheme for cataloging rival schools' positions on the highest good. Nikolsky argues that this division was transmitted into both Cicero and Diogenes Laertius from a single common source, rather than constituting an independent corroboration of a real Epicurean doctrine.

### David Sedley

In "Epicurean versus Cyrenaic Happiness," ch. 5 of *Selfhood and the Soul: Essays on Ancient Thought and Literature in Honour of Christopher Gill*, ed. Matthew Wright, Richard Seaford, and John M. Wilkins (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 89-106, and "The Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics," in *Epicureismo greco e romano*, ed. Gabriele Giannantoni and Marcello Gigante (Bibliopolis, 1996), Sedley consistently treats kinetic and katastematic pleasure as jointly necessary aspects of a complete life, not as a hierarchy.[82] On the specific question of whether katastematic pleasure alone constitutes the goal, he writes in "Epicurean versus Cyrenaic Happiness," p. 103:[83]

> "Only a tranquil life additionally textured by a variety of kinetic pleasures can be enjoyed as a whole from any chosen temporal viewpoint... Here we are very close to the heart of the Epicurean eudaimonistic enterprise."[84]

And, in "Inferential Foundations," p. 138, addressing Cicero's own attempt to use the kinetic/katastematic distinction as a trap against Epicurus's followers, Sedley argues that Epicurus's own silence on which kind of pleasure infants pursue was "methodologically correct," precisely because specifying a hierarchy of kinds would have undermined the "absolute generality" of his account.[85] In other words, Sedley reads Epicurus as having deliberately avoided committing to any kind-based hierarchy at all, not as covertly holding one.

### Kelly Arenson

Arenson, in *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), Introduction p. 4 and p. 140, aligns explicitly with Gosling, Taylor, and Nikolsky, and names directly the danger their reading closes off:

> "I share their position that what counts as properly kinetic according to Epicureans is the pleasure linked to the perceived process of restoring painless organic functioning, whereas what counts as katastematic is the awareness of the organism's painless functioning."[86]

Arenson also poses, in her own words, the objection this whole line of scholarship is answering: "How would Epicureans dodge the charge that their best life resembles the state of a corpse?" (p. 140) – the "corpse problem" that follows directly from treating katastematic pleasure as an inert absence rather than a positively enjoyed condition.[87]

### Emily Austin

Austin, in *Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life* (Oxford University Press, 2022), ch. 4, n. 8, declines to relitigate the dispute in her main text for a general audience, but states in a footnote that she is "adopting a view roughly in line with Gosling and Taylor (1982) and Arenson (2019)."[88]

### Catherine Wilson

Wilson (Presidential Professor of Philosophy, University of York) has written two popular-audience books directly on Epicurus: *How to Be an Epicurean* (Basic Books, 2019; published in the UK as *The Pleasure Principle: Epicureanism and the Good Life*), and, more historically focused, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2008, revised paperback 2015). The historical volume does not engage the pleasure/ataraxia question directly – its subject is Epicureanism's reception in early modern philosophy. But *How to Be an Epicurean* is unambiguous, p. 10:

> "In fact, Epicurus did consider pleasure, including pleasure in food and drink, to be not only the main motive of our actions but also the supreme good."[89]

She quotes Epicurus's own words immediately after ("Pleasure is our first and kindred good… we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing") and, elsewhere in the same book, explicitly frames her project as "defending the authentic Epicurus" against those who misuse or misread him.[90]

**R.W. Sharples**

Sharples's *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* (Routledge, 1996), p. 84, a standard academic survey covering all three schools, states plainly:

> "For Epicurus the goal of life is pleasure, and the happy life is that with most pleasure and least pain."[91]

He goes on to give a survey of the kinetic / katastematic puzzle, but never asserts that ataraxia replaces or outranks pleasure as the named goal.

**Gisela Striker**

Striker, "Ataraxia: Happiness as Tranquillity," originally *The Monist* 73, no. 1 (1990): 97-110, reprinted as ch. 9 of *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 183 of the reprint, argues directly against treating tranquility as a rival end in its own right:[92]

> "I will argue that tranquillity was in fact not a serious contender for the position of ultimate good in ancient times. Greek theories of happiness from Plato to Epicurus were attempts to spell out what sort of a life one would have to lead in order to have good reasons for feeling tranquil or contented; they were not recipes for reaching a certain state of mind."[93]

And, on Epicurus specifically, p. 185 of the reprint:

> "Thus tranquillity, for Epicurus, is the state of mind of the happy person, a part of happiness, but not happiness itself."[94]

A second Striker paper reinforces the same conclusion. "Epicurean Hedonism," ch. 10 of the same collection (originally in J. Brunschwig and M. Nussbaum, eds., *Passions and Perceptions: Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 3-17), is a reading of Cicero's *De Finibus* Book I which defends Epicurus's kinetic / katastematic pleasure distinction against the charge of inconsistency. Striker's point is that *aponia* and *ataraxia* are what the *greatest pleasure* consists in, not a separate goal displacing pleasure. Her own summary, p. 207, states this directly:

> "It was this terminological move that allowed Epicurus to identify the greatest pleasure with the good life... I would suggest that he introduced the

> notion of katastematic pleasure in order to show that happiness can be the same as pleasure after all."[95]

That is: Epicurus calls the painless state "pleasure" precisely so that pleasure, not something else, can remain the highest good.

### Pascal Massie

Massie, "Ataraxia: Tranquility at the End," in Sean D. Kirkland and Eric Sanday, eds., *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), p. 389, states plainly:[96]

> "...ataraxia is not a degree zero since... it is already pleasure and Epicurus' insistence on the idea that ataraxia is a form of pleasure rules out a common objection according to which one who follows such an ethics would live a life of indifference."[97]

He also explicitly rejects treating kinetic and katastematic pleasure as opposed categories:

> "The kind of pleasure that constitutes the end is not identified with something mental by opposition to something physical, nor is it katastematic by opposition to kinetic."[98]

### Julia Annas

Annas, "Epicurus on Pleasure and Happiness," *Philosophical Topics* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 5-21, p. 8, goes further than most by objecting to the English word itself:[99]

> "...ataraxia is not an alternative end but a specification of the kind of pleasure that can be our final end..."[100]

> "Ataraxia is the state in which you are not hindered by pain or anything upsetting. You are functioning normally and nothing unpleasant is interfering. This is not 'tranquility'; normal activity can be energetic and varied."[101]

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→ *Notes for this article*

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# The True Width and Depth of Epicurean Pleasure: How Cicero's Biggest Lie About Epicurus Exposes the Most Widespread Anti-Epicurean Game

## Cicero's Lie, and Why It Matters More Than One Lie Should

Near the end of Book One of *On Ends*, having just listened to Torquatus deliver the fullest statement of Epicurean ethics that survives from antiquity, Cicero turns on his host and asks a question meant to be unanswerable:

> "What actual pleasure do you, Torquatus, or does Triarius here, derive from literature, from history and learning, from turning the pages of the poets and committing vast quantities of verse to memory?"[1] – Cicero, *De Finibus* 1.25 (Rackham translation)

The implication is plain: Epicurus's philosophy has no room for the pleasures of literature, history, and learning, so an Epicurean who enjoys them is either lying about what his own philosophy permits or admitting, without meaning to, that pleasure cannot really be the whole of the good. It is a clever question. It is also false – and it is refuted by Cicero's own dialogue before Book One even closes. Torquatus states, as part of the very speech Cicero has just finished summarizing, 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" (*De Fin.* 1.55), and describes the wise man's continuous happiness as constituted by remembering, by reflecting, by comparing – mental acts, all of them (*De Fin.* 1.62).[2] Epicurus's

own letters go further still, as we will see below. The full case against Cicero's honesty on this specific point – including the moment, later in the very same work, where Cicero quietly abandons the charge himself – is made in detail in Guilty As Charged: Cicero's Deceit In Attacking Epicurean Pleasure, and that article should be read for the full accounting. It will not be repeated here.

What concerns this article is something larger than one dishonest debating trick, however skillfully executed. Cicero's question depends on a hidden premise, and the premise is what has done the real damage across twenty-three centuries: the assumption that Epicurean pleasure is *narrow* – that it names, at bottom, only the pleasures of the body, taken in the moment, and that anything beyond that (literature, history, friendship, the study of nature, philosophy itself) must therefore be foreign to Epicurus, an embarrassment to be explained away or a contradiction to be exposed. Once that premise is granted, Epicurus loses no matter what he says. If he claims to enjoy literature and history, he is admitting pleasures his own theory cannot account for. If he does not make that claim, he is a philistine. Cicero built this trap with care. But it is not really a trap at all once the premise is refused – because the premise is false. Epicurean pleasure was never narrow. It was, from the beginning, wide enough to include everything a full human life contains, and in several important respects Epicurus ranked its non-bodily forms *above* its bodily ones. This article maps that width and that depth directly from the primary sources, and then turns to why the false, narrow picture has proven so durable, and so useful to Epicurus's critics, for so long.

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## The Width: Everything Epicurean Pleasure Actually Covers

### Bodily Pleasure, Necessary and Beyond

Epicurus never denied that bodily pleasure matters, and nothing in this article should be read as suggesting otherwise. Food, drink, warmth, shelter, health, and sexual pleasure are all real goods, and Epicurus was direct almost to the point of bluntness about it: "I do not know how I will conceive the good if I take away the pleasures of taste, if I take away sexual pleasures, if I take away pleasures of hearing, and if I take away the pleasant movements of form in vision" (quoted by Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* 3.41, and by Athenaeus).[3] Epicurus classified desires carefully

– natural and necessary, natural but not necessary, and empty – precisely so that bodily pleasure could be pursued intelligently rather than either denied or indulged without limit. None of what follows is a demotion of the body. It is an insistence that the body is not the *whole* of the map.

### Mental Pleasure: Memory, Anticipation, and Understanding

The mind, for Epicurus, is not a passive recipient of whatever the body happens to be feeling. It does things the body cannot do at all. It reaches back into the past through memory and forward into the future through anticipation, and both of these are themselves sources of real pleasure, independent of whatever the body is experiencing right now. Torquatus states the position on Epicurus's behalf directly: the wise man "remembers the past with thankfulness," is "aware" of the "importance and agreeableness" of the present, and "is also very far removed" from anxious dependence on the future, "but awaits it while enjoying the present" (*De Fin.* 1.62).[4] Every verb in that sentence names a mental act, and every one of them is presented as a source of the wise man's happiness.

### Friendship

Epicurus placed enormous weight on friendship – not as the highest good itself, but as, in his own words, the greatest single thing that practical wisdom provides toward a happy life: "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship." (*Principal Doctrine* 27).[5] A philosophy whose highest good had no room for anything but immediate bodily sensation would have no coherent way to explain why the presence or loss of a friend matters as much as it plainly does to every Epicurean source that discusses it – including Epicurus's own will, which carefully provides for the children of his friends Metrodorus and Polyaenus by name (Diogenes Laertius X.19).

### Love

The Epicurean tradition did not treat sexual desire and romantic love as embarrassments to be managed out of existence. Lucretius opens the entire *De Rerum Natura* with an invocation of Venus as the generative power behind all animate life, and the Epicurean classification of desires treats sexual pleasure as a natural desire in its own right, not a temptation to be merely tolerated. The philosophy's

actual treatment of sex, love, and marriage – including the disputed ancient testimony on the subject and Epicurus's own provision in his will for a friend's daughter's marriage – is developed fully in Venus, Reason, and the Full Cup.

### Philosophy and the Study of Nature

This is the region of Epicurean pleasure Cicero's question works hardest to hide, and it is addressed at length below, because it is the single most direct refutation available of the claim that Epicurus's pleasure was narrow. Epicurus did not merely tolerate philosophical and scientific inquiry as a chore justified by its results. He identified it, in his own first-person voice, as the chief source of his own happiness.

### Laughter and Ordinary Discourse

Epicurean pleasure was not solemn. Vatican Saying 41 catches the tone precisely: "We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."[6] Laughing and philosophizing are named in the same breath, as companion activities, not sequential stages where one is earned by suffering through the other.

### Justice, and a Life Among Others

Epicurean pleasure also has a social and civic dimension that a narrowly bodily reading cannot accommodate: the natural-compact account of justice, developed in Natural Justice, and the case against the stereotype of the withdrawn Epicurean recluse, developed in Not a Bunker But a Camp and in Complementaries, which treats love and hate as two natural responses that a full Epicurean life must be equipped to feel, not suppress.

Taken together, this is the true width of Epicurean pleasure: bodily, mental, emotional, intellectual, and social, all at once, all genuinely pleasurable in the same basic sense – not a grudging list of exceptions bolted onto a fundamentally narrow theory, but the theory's actual and original scope.

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## The Depth: Epicurus Ranked Mental and Intellectual Pleasure Above the Pleasures of the Moment

Width alone would already refute Cicero's question. But the primary sources make a stronger claim than mere width, and it is worth stating plainly because it is so often missed: Epicurus did not treat mental and intellectual pleasure as merely *equal in kind* to bodily pleasure. In several of his most direct statements, he ranked it *higher*.

### "More Influence . . . Than Either Feeling . . . in the Body"

Torquatus states the principle and his reason for it in the same breath, at *De Finibus* 1.55: mental pleasures and pains, though they arise from bodily ones, are "much more intense than those of the body; since the body can feel only what is present to it at the moment, whereas the mind is also cognizant of the past and of the future."[7] A bodily pain is fixed to the present instant; a mental pain can be magnified by the belief that some vast future evil is coming, and by the same logic a mental pleasure is magnified by its freedom from any such fear. "This therefore clearly appears," Torquatus concludes, "that intense mental pleasure or distress contributes more to our happiness or misery than a bodily pleasure or pain of equal duration."[8] This is not a minor technical aside. It is Epicurus's own explanation, in the mouth of his own ancient spokesman, for why a life governed by intelligent reflection outweighs a life governed by the pursuit of bodily sensation as such.

### The Wise Man's Own Testimony: My Own Peace Chiefly in a Life So Occupied

The strongest evidence is not a claim made on Epicurus's behalf. It is Epicurus speaking about himself, in the first person, in the *Letter to Herodotus*:

> "Wherefore since the method I have described is valuable to all those who are accustomed to the investigation of nature, I who urge upon others the constant occupation in the investigation of nature, and find my own peace chiefly in a life so occupied, have composed for you another epitome on these

> lines, summing up the first principles of the whole doctrine."[9] – Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* §37 (Bailey translation)

"Find my own peace chiefly in a life so occupied."[10] Not a theory about what other people should value. Not advice dispensed while he himself found satisfaction elsewhere. A direct, personal statement of where his own greatest contentment actually came from – and it came from the ongoing investigation of nature, not from eating, drinking, or any bodily pleasure of the moment. Later in the same letter, he restates the point as a general doctrine rather than a personal confession: "we must hold that to arrive at accurate knowledge of the cause of things of most moment is the business of natural science, and that happiness depends on this . . . and upon knowing what the heavenly bodies really are, and any kindred facts contributing to exact knowledge in this respect" (*Letter to Herodotus* §78).[11] The *Letter to Pythocles* makes the identical claim about the study of celestial phenomena specifically: "we must not suppose that any other object is to be gained from the knowledge of the phenomena of the sky . . . than peace of mind and a sure confidence, just as in all other branches of study" (*Letter to Pythocles* §85).[12] Three separate statements, across two letters, converge on the same conclusion: understanding nature is not a means to some other pleasure waiting at the end of the inquiry. The understanding itself is the pleasure, and Epicurus named it as his own greatest one.

## "Not Continuous Drinkings and Revelings"

The *Letter to Menoeceus* states the same ranking as an explicit denial, naming the bodily pleasures of the moment one by one and setting them aside:

> "For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."[13] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* §132

This is, in effect, Epicurus answering Cicero's question two centuries before Cicero asked it, and answering it in exactly the opposite direction Cicero needed. The pleasant life is not made by any list of bodily indulgences, however refined. It is made by reasoned reflection – an activity of the mind, not the body, and one

Epicurus names as the actual foundation of a pleasant life rather than a mere accompaniment to it.

### The Deathbed Letter

The clearest single demonstration of the ranking comes from the last hours of Epicurus's own life, in a letter to his friend Idomeneus that Diogenes Laertius preserves in full:

> "On this truly happy day of my life, as I am at the point of death, I write this to you. The disease in my bladder and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their natural severity: but against all this is the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you."[14] – Epicurus, letter to Idomeneus, quoted in Diogenes Laertius X.22

A man dying in severe physical pain describes the day as "truly happy," and gives the reason: not any bodily relief, of which there was none, but the mental pleasure of recollection – specifically, the memory of philosophical conversation with a friend. If mental pleasure could not outweigh bodily pain in the Epicurean accounting, this letter could not have been written in the terms Epicurus chose to write it. It is the depth of Epicurean pleasure demonstrated under the most exacting possible test: the body failing completely, and the mind still sufficient to make the day one of genuine happiness.

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## Why "Hedonist" Misfires as a Label for Epicurus

If Epicurean pleasure is this wide and this deep, where does the popular stereotype – pleasure as a fixation on immediate bodily gratification – actually come from? Not from Epicurus. It comes from his own ancient rivals: Aristippus and the Cyrenaic school, who held, as a matter of explicit doctrine, that the immediate bodily sensation of the present moment is the only good, and who rejected outright the idea that a settled, painless condition of body and mind could itself count as pleasure – the very position the Cyrenaics mocked by comparing it to the condition of a sleeping person. Cicero's own summary of the philosophical schools, in a single sentence, keeps Epicurus and the Cyrenaics carefully apart: "After him came Epicurus, whose school is now better known, though he does

not exactly agree with the Cyrenaics about pleasure itself" (Cicero, *Academic Questions*, Yonge translation).[15] Epicurus did not casually differ from the Cyrenaics on a technical point. He built much of his own account of pleasure – including the katastematic/kinetic question addressed at length in Against Katastematic Supremacy – specifically to distinguish his own position from theirs.

The popular caricature of "the hedonist" – a person who lives for the sensation of the present moment and nothing else – is therefore not a caricature of Epicurus at all. It is a reasonably fair description of Aristippus. It has simply been transferred onto Epicurus by centuries of readers (and more than a few scholars) who have not troubled to keep the two schools apart, aided by critics like Cicero who had every rhetorical reason to blur the distinction. Even reference works that specialize in the subject acknowledge the resulting confusion: hedonism's history, as one standard philosophical encyclopedia puts it, has been "bedevilled" by the false assumption that it names only bodily pleasure – an assumption that fits the Cyrenaics far better than it fits the philosopher who explicitly rejected their position. Whether Epicurus is best described as an "ethical hedonist," a "psychological hedonist," both, or neither, in the technical modern philosophical sense, is a separate and more specialized question, addressed in Was Epicurus a Psychological Hedonist, an Ethical Hedonist, Both, or Neither? What matters here is narrower and more decisive: whatever label one ultimately prefers, the content of Epicurus's actual position – wide enough to include memory, friendship, philosophy, and the study of nature, and ranking several of these above bodily sensation – is simply not the position the word "hedonist" conjures in ordinary usage. To call Epicurus a hedonist in that popular sense is not a simplification. It is a description of the wrong philosopher.

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## The Anti-Epicurean Game Exposed

Return, now, to Cicero's question, and its hidden premise: that Epicurean pleasure is narrow, bodily, and confined to the present moment, so that anything wider must be foreign to it. Once the premise is stated plainly, the whole maneuver is exposed as a dilemma with a rigged first step. Cicero needed his Roman readers to accept, without quite noticing they were accepting it, that pleasure-as-

Epicurus-meant-it could only be the Cyrenaic version – because only then does his question land as a genuine trap. If Torquatus admits to enjoying literature and history, he seems to be smuggling in a non-bodily, non-Epicurean pleasure, conceding ground to the Stoics and Platonists Cicero actually favored. If Torquatus denies it, he looks like a philistine defending a philosophy fit only for animals. Both horns of the dilemma depend on the same false narrowing, and neither one is available once the true width and depth of Epicurean pleasure are back on the table. There was no admission for Torquatus to make and no philistinism for him to defend, because Epicurus never held the narrow position Cicero's question requires him to hold.

This is not a trick Cicero invented once and then abandoned. It is a template, reused by every subsequent tradition that has needed Epicurus to be smaller than he actually was. Stoic and Christian moralists needed him narrow and bodily so that his rejection of their own asceticism could be dismissed as mere self-indulgence rather than engaged as a serious rival account of the good life. Later humanist and therapeutic reinterpreters needed him narrow in the opposite direction – stripped of bodily and sensory pleasure altogether and reduced to a philosopher of quiet, disembodied tranquility – so that his actual, full-blooded insistence on pleasure as the good could be softened into something more respectable to modern sensibilities. Both moves start from the same rigged premise Cicero used first: shrink the man before you argue with him. Restoring the true width and depth of Epicurean pleasure does not just answer one dishonest question from one Roman orator. It removes the foundation every subsequent version of the same game has been built on.

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## Conclusion

Epicurean pleasure was never the narrow thing Cicero's question needs it to have been. It is wide enough to include the necessary pleasures of the body and the higher pleasures of variety and refinement when circumstances allow; wide enough to include memory and anticipation, friendship and love, laughter and philosophy, justice and a full civic life. And within that width it has real depth: Epicurus's own words, not merely his defenders', rank mental and intellectual

pleasure – above all the sustained pleasure of understanding nature – among the greatest goods available to a human being, greater in several respects than any bodily pleasure of the moment. The stereotype that would make Epicurus a philosopher of the sensory present belongs to Aristippus and the Cyrenaics, whom Epicurus took pains to distinguish himself from in his own lifetime. Cicero's question about literature and history was never really about literature and history. It was an attempt to make Epicurus small enough to lose to before the argument had properly begun. The true width and depth of Epicurean pleasure is the standing refutation of that attempt, and of every version of it made since.

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# Living For The Pleasures Of The Moment Isn't Epicurean — It's Lunacy: Why the World's Most Famous "Hedonist" Would Have Despised What We Call Hedonism

## The Words You've Seen a Thousand Times, and What It Actually Says

You have almost certainly seen this sentence before, even if you've never read a word of it: *"Neque porro quisquam est, qui dolorem ipsum, quia dolor sit, amet, consectetur, adipisci velit..."* It's the source of "Lorem Ipsum" – the scrambled placeholder text that has filled empty design mockups and dummy web pages for decades. Almost nobody who has typed it, pasted it, or stared at it while waiting for real content ever learns what it actually says, or where it came from.

It comes from a real philosophical argument, in a real ancient book, about what Epicurus actually taught. And once unscrambled, it says something almost nobody expects:

> "No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure."[1] – Cicero, *On Ends* 1.32 (spoken by the Epicurean Torquatus, presenting Epicurus's own position)

Read that again. This is not a philosopher telling you to chase every pleasant sensation the moment it presents itself. This is a philosopher insisting, as a foundational premise, that pleasure has to be pursued *rationally* – weighed against its consequences – or the result can be more pain than pleasure. That single, famous, endlessly-copy-pasted paragraph is Exhibit A in a case that deserves to be made plainly and directly: the popular image of Epicurus as the philosopher of "live for the moment" is not just an oversimplification. It is close to being the exact opposite of what he actually taught.

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## What Most People Think "Hedonism" Means

Say the word "Epicurean" to most people and you'll get some version of the same picture: a person who chases bodily pleasure – food, drink, sex, comfort – right now, without much thought for what comes after - either to himself or to others around him. Eat the second dessert. Skip the workout. Enjoy today; let tomorrow sort itself out. This is the popular meaning of "hedonism," and it is the reason Epicurus's name still gets used as a punchline or a warning label two thousand three hundred years after his death.

Here is the problem: Epicurus said, explicitly, in his own surviving words, that this is not what he taught. Not once, not vaguely, but repeatedly, in his most important letter, and in the fullest ancient defense of his ethics that survives.

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## "Not Continuous Drinkings and Revelings"

Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus* is the single most important summary of his ethical teaching that has come down to us, written near the end of his life as a compact statement of how to live. He does not merely fail to endorse the "pleasure of the moment" picture – he names it directly and explicitly rules it out, twice, in successive sentences:[2]

> "When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but

> freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind."[3] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* [131][4]

> "For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit."[5] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* [132][6]

Notice exactly what is being denied here, in Epicurus's own words: the pleasures of "profligates," continuous drinking, lust, luxury – the entire catalogue of "pleasure of the moment" behavior – is named directly and rejected directly, by name, as the source of a pleasant life.[7] Epicurus even anticipates the misreading by name ("as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand") – he knew, in his own lifetime, that people were making exactly the mistake that is still made about him today, and he answered it directly.[8] What is named instead of profligate sensation-chasing is *sober reasoning*. Not impulse. Not appetite. Reasoning – and specifically, reasoning that traces out the motives and consequences behind every choice and every avoidance.

Aside: What Epicurus meant by "freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind" is a lesson for another day, but here's the key: Epicurus held that if we are experiencing anything at all we are experiencing either pleasure or pain, with no third alternative.[9] Ask yourself - "*In any system with only two options, what are you experiencing if you are not experiencing pain?*"

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## Every Consequence, Every Time

Epicurus did not merely reject blind indulgence in the abstract. He built an entire method for how pleasure is supposed to be pursued, and the method is explicitly about weighing consequences before acting – never simply grabbing whatever feels good in the moment:

> "Since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think

> many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen."[10] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* [129]

Read the middle of that sentence again: *"we think many pains better than pleasures."*[11] This is not a philosopher who tells you to seize every pleasant moment on offer. This is a philosopher instructing you to run the calculation *every time* – what does this pleasure cost, what does that pain buy – and to choose pain deliberately, when the arithmetic favors it. A person who genuinely lived by "chase the pleasure of the moment" would have no use whatsoever for a doctrine like this. Epicurus needed it because that was never his doctrine to begin with.

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## The Best Life, Not the Most Sensation

Epicurus draws the same distinction again with a homely, memorable image – food:

> "Just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."[12] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* [126]

The goal is not *more*. The goal is *best*. Someone chasing the pleasure of the moment wants the largest plate, the biggest hit, the next thing, immediately, in whatever quantity is available. Epicurus says the wise person is after something else entirely: the most pleasant life as a whole, which is a matter of quality and proportion, not quantity and immediacy. A glutton and an Epicurean might both enjoy dinner. Only one of them is thinking about the shape of an entire life while doing it.

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## Prudence Above Philosophy Itself

If there is a second word that captures what Epicurus actually built his ethics around beyond pleasure itself, that word is prudence. Prudence is the practical

wisdom to judge correctly between competing choices. Epicurus states this with startling directness:

> "Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is prudence. Wherefore prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy: for from prudence are sprung all the other virtues, and it teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly."[13] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* [132]

Prudence – the capacity for sober, consequence-weighing judgment – is described here as more precious than philosophy itself. A doctrine of "live for the moment" has no room for a claim like this, none whatsoever. You do not need prudence to indulge an impulse. You need prudence precisely when the impulse and the actual best interest of your whole life are pulling in different directions. And that conflict and need for prudent choosing is exactly the situation Epicurus is telling you to expect, constantly, and to navigate with reason rather than simply surrender to it.

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## Contempt for the Pleasure-of-the-Moment Crowd

Here is where the case closes completely. It is not enough that Epicurus rejected the "live for the moment" doctrine in his own words. His most detailed ancient ethical defense states, in so many words, that Epicureans hold the people who actually live that way in *contempt*:

> "We denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will... The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains."[14] – Torquatus, presenting the Epicurean position in Cicero's *On Ends* 1.33

This is the very next sentence after the "Lorem Ipsum" passage above, from the same ancient dialogue, spoken by the same character defending Epicurus's philo-

sophy in detail. "Denounce with righteous indignation and dislike" is about as strong a condemnation as classical prose gets.[15] And it is aimed directly at people "beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment" – which is to say, aimed directly at the very stereotype that today gets applied *to Epicurus himself*.[16] The ancient world's fullest surviving defense of Epicurean ethics spends a significant part of its energy condemning the exact behavior modern popular culture imagines Epicurus endorsing.

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## So Who Actually Was the "Live for the Moment" Philosopher?

If this isn't Epicurus, whose philosophy was it? The ancient world did have a real answer: Aristippus of Cyrene and the Cyrenaic school. While our knowledge of them is limited, as far as we can tell the Cyrenaics held – as an explicit, serious philosophical position – that the immediate bodily sensation of the present moment is the only good worth pursuing, with no calculus of consequences required. If this report is true, the Cyrenaics are the actual ancient source of the "hedonist" stereotype. Epicurus came later - he knew the Cyrenaics' position and built much of his own ethical framework in conscious contrast to it. The popular imagination has simply attached the wrong philosopher's name to the doctrine.

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## The Verdict

Take the popular meaning of "hedonist" at face value: someone who lives for immediate bodily pleasure, without weighing consequences, without patience, without prudence, without a thought for tomorrow. By that definition, Epicurus does not qualify. He explicitly rejected unbridled drinking, lust, and luxury as the source of a good life. He built an entire practical method around weighing every pleasure against its consequences before choosing it. He said plainly that we should sometimes choose pain over pleasure, when the arithmetic of a whole life favors it. He ranked prudence above philosophy itself. And his own ancient defender said, in the plainest terms, that Epicureans regard the people who actually live for the pleasure of the moment with contempt.

If that is what "hedonist" means, then judged by his own words and by the fullest ancient account of his ethics, Epicurus was among the least hedonistic philosophers of the ancient world. Epicurus was a philosopher of reason, patience, and prudent calculation, who simply concluded, after all that reasoning, that the test of a well-lived life is not non-existent supernatural gods or rules, but whether that life experiences greater pleasure than pain. Living for the pleasures of the moment was never his teaching. By his own account, it was closer to lunacy.

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# The Full Cup Model: Pleasure, Purity, and the Limit That Answers Plato

*"I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful form."*[1] – Epicurus, in Diogenes Laertius, Book X

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## Introduction

Epicurus declared pleasure to be the beginning and end of the happy life. He said it plainly, repeatedly, and without apology. He said it in letters, in treatises, and in the doctrines he intended his school to memorize. His ancient critics – Stoics, Platonists, and Academic Skeptics – heard him and understood him perfectly well, which is precisely why they attacked him with such fury. They did not attack him for teaching tranquility or asceticism. They attacked him for teaching pleasure.

Yet a persistent tradition of modern commentary has transformed this vigorous, life-affirming philosophy into something that looks remarkably like what Epicurus's enemies claimed he *should* have taught. In this transformation, the Epicurean goal becomes not pleasure but "tranquility" – not a life filled with the richest and most varied pleasures that reason can secure, but a life of minimal stimulation, reduced desire, and passive freedom from disturbance. The Epicurean wise man, in this reading, seeks not to fill his life with good things but to quiet himself into a state where nothing much is felt at all. One modern commentator,

characterizing this majority position with unwitting precision, called it a "zero state" – a condition in which the absence of pain is the highest achievement, and anything further is mere decoration.

This is not merely a matter of overcaution. Epicurus himself gave the direct rebuttal to a pain-avoidance-above-all reading of his own doctrine:

> *"It is better to endure these particular pains so that we may enjoy greater joys. It is well to abstain from these particular pleasures in order that we may not suffer more severe pains."*[2] – Epicurus, Bailey Fragment 62

That is a net-pleasure calculation, not a zero-state rule. A philosophy whose highest good was simply the avoidance of pain would never counsel *enduring* pain for the sake of a greater pleasure gained. This article argues that the zero-state reading is wrong by the standard of the Epicurean texts themselves, and that this becomes clear once we understand the specific argument Epicurus was actually answering. Epicurus was not describing the good life in a vacuum. He was answering a specific and powerful argument – developed most fully by Plato and inherited by the Stoics – that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it has no limit. The Epicurean doctrines that have been most misread – the "limit of pleasure," the terms *ataraxia* and *aponia*, the statement of *Principal Doctrine* 3 – are not the whole of Epicurean ethics but the targeted philosophical response to that argument. Once we understand the argument being answered, we understand both what these doctrines mean and what they do not mean.

The model that results is what I will call the Full Cup Model. Its central image comes from Lucretius, who described a life in which pleasures are squandered not because they were pursued too eagerly but because, like water poured into a leaky vessel, they were never properly secured. The goal – the Epicurean answer to Plato – is a life in which the vessel is sound and the cup is full: filled with real, vivid, active pleasures, of both mind and body, with as much pain removed as reason and circumstance allow. A full cup cannot be made fuller. But it is full, not empty.

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## Part One: Plato's Challenge

### The Principal Doctrines as a Series of Responses

Before examining Plato's specific argument about the limits of pleasure, it helps to step back and observe a broader pattern in Epicurus's own most authoritative list of teachings. The *Principal Doctrines* were composed to be memorized, and the first three of them are not a random selection from across the Epicurean system. They form a systematic series of responses to the three most powerful arguments used in the ancient world – and still used today – to frighten people away from pleasure as the goal of life.

*Principal Doctrine 1* declares that a blessed and immortal being has no trouble itself and creates none for others, and therefore has no use for anger, favor, or any concern with human conduct.[3] This is a direct response to the oldest and most effective instrument of moral control: the claim that the gods reward their friends and punish their enemies, and that we had therefore better subject our behavior – including our pursuit of pleasure – to whatever the gods and their representatives on earth demand. The argument says: abandon pleasure as your guide, submit to divine command, or face retribution. Epicurus answers: no being that is truly blessed concerns itself with human affairs at all. The threat is empty.

*Principal Doctrine 2* declares that death is nothing to us, for when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we no longer exist.[4] This responds to the second great instrument of control: the fear of what comes after death. This argument says: death may mean judgment or suffering, and you had better live rightly – which means, not pursuing your own pleasure – or face that prospect. Epicurus answers: death is the complete end of sensation, and where there is no sensation there is neither good nor evil. The terror of death, and with it every claim to authority that rests on threatening us with what follows it, is groundless.

*Principal Doctrines 3* then addresses the third great challenge to pleasure as the goal of life: the philosophical argument that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it has no limit. This is the argument Plato developed most fully, the ar-

gument the Stoics inherited and pressed, and the argument that has given rise to the most persistent misreading of Epicurean ethics. It says: pleasure is indefinitely extendable, never complete, and therefore can never constitute the highest good – so we should discard it as the standard of life in favor of something that can be achieved and completed, namely virtue. *Principal Doctrine 3* answers this directly: the magnitude of pleasure does reach a limit, and that limit is reached when all pain has been removed.[5] Later on, *Principal Doctrine 18* further establishes that once pain is removed, pleasure cannot be increased in magnitude – only varied in content – so the completeness of the highest good is secured.[6]

This pattern is essential for reading PD3 correctly. The doctrine is not an isolated technical statement about pain and pleasure. It is the third in a deliberate sequence of responses to arguments that all point the same direction: toward abandoning pleasure as the guide of life in favor of submission to external authority, whether divine command, fear of death, or philosophical argument about limits. Epicurus was not retreating when he wrote PD3. He was advancing directly into the strongest philosophical challenge his opponents had mounted, and defeating it on their own terms. The full cup – the completed, limited, fully achieved pleasurable life – is his answer to Plato, just as the nothing-to-fear gods and the nothing-to-fear death are his answers to the first two challenges.

With that pattern established, we can now examine the Platonic argument itself in full.

## Plato's Argument in the Philebus

To understand what Epicurus was doing, we must understand what he was responding to. The philosophical challenge to pleasure as the highest good was stated most clearly by Plato in the *Philebus*.

Plato's challenge runs as follows. If we are to identify the highest good – the thing that makes a life complete and that cannot itself be increased – it must be something that has a definite limit. A thing that can always be increased further is by definition incomplete. Virtue, in Plato's framework, has a definite limit: it is either present or absent, and once fully present it cannot be made more so. But pleasure, Plato argues, has no such limit. Pleasures admit of "more and less" –

they can always be greater or smaller in quantity and intensity, and there is no natural stopping point.

> *SOCRATES: Have pleasure and pain a limit, or do they belong to the class which admits of more and less?*
>
> *PHILEBUS: They belong to the class which admits of more, Socrates; for pleasure would not be perfectly good if she were not infinite in quantity and degree.*
>
> *SOCRATES: Nor would pain, Philebus, be perfectly evil.* – Plato, *Philebus*

But Plato turns this feature into a fatal objection. Precisely because pleasure is infinite, indefinitely extendable, and always capable of increase, it cannot be the highest good. The highest good must be something that can be achieved, that has a natural completion, and about which one can say: this is it, this is the goal, and I have reached it. Pleasure, being unlimited, can never be fully reached. Chasing it is like pouring water into a vessel with no bottom.

Plato makes the same argument again, at greater length, through his discussion of purity. The truest and best of any quality, he argues, is not that which is greatest in quantity but that which is most unadulterated – most free from admixture with its opposite:

> *SOCRATES: And now, having fairly separated the pure pleasures and those which may be rightly termed impure, let us further add to our description of them, that the pleasures which are in excess have no measure, but that those which are not in excess have measure.*
>
> *SOCRATES: When you speak of purity and clearness, or of excess, abundance, greatness and sufficiency, in what relation do these terms stand to truth? ... I should wish to test pleasure and knowledge in every possible way, in order that if there be a pure and impure element in either of them, I may present the pure element for judgment.*
>
> *SOCRATES: Suppose that we first of all take whiteness. How can there be purity in whiteness, and what purity? Is that purest which is greatest or most in quantity, or that which is most unadulterated and freest from any admixture of other colours?*
>
> *PROTARCHUS: Clearly that which is most unadulterated.*

> *SOCRATES: True, Protarchus; and so the purest white, and not the greatest or largest in quantity, is to be deemed truest and most beautiful?*
>
> *PROTARCHUS: Right.* – Plato, *Philebus*

Apply this principle to pleasure, substituting "pleasure" for "whiteness" and "pain" for "other colours," and Plato's implication for pleasure becomes immediate: the truest pleasure is not the greatest in quantity but the most unmixed, the most free from any admixture of pain. This purity argument is important because it gives Epicurus a framework for his answer, as we shall see.

The same anti-Epicurean argument, restated as a direct sneer, recurs centuries later in Lactantius, who took the "absence of pain" reading of Epicurus at face value and mocked it as a philosophy fit only for the sick:

> *"To think that the highest good is the absence of pain is surely not characteristic of the Peripatetics or Stoics but of the bedridden philosophers. For who would not understand that this is the point discussed by the sick and those placed in some state of pain? What is so ridiculous as to consider that which a physician can give, as the highest good."*[7] – Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* III.8.10

Lactantius was wrong in his caricature, but the caricature itself is instructive: it is exactly the "zero-state," absence-of-pain-as-trivial-good reading that this article argues is a misunderstanding of Epicurus's actual position – taken to its most contemptuous conclusion by a critic with every motive to make Epicurus look small.

### Seneca's Version of the Same Argument

The Stoic philosopher Seneca, writing two and a half centuries after Epicurus, restates the Platonic argument in compressed and memorable form. Seneca is a Stoic whose interpretation of Epicurean philosophy cannot be trusted as a guide to what Epicurus meant. Seneca consistently frames Epicurean material through a Stoic lens that distorts it However his restatement of the anti-pleasure argument is very clear and represents exactly the kind of challenge Epicurus was addressing. Seneca first states the general principle, applying it to nature's own limits on desire:

> *"If you live according to nature, you will never be poor; if you live according to opinion, you will never be rich. Nature's wants are slight; the demands of opin-*

> *ion are boundless.... Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping point. The false has no limits."*[8] – Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, Book I, Letter XVI

He then presses the argument directly against Epicurus's own reported formula for the highest good:

> *"We find mentioned in the works of Epicurus two goods, of which his Supreme Good, or blessedness, is composed, namely, a body free from pain and a soul free from disturbance. These goods, if they are complete, do not increase; for how can that which is complete increase? The body is, let us suppose, free from pain; what increase can there be to this absence of pain? The soul is composed and calm; what increase can there be to this tranquility? Just as fair weather, purified into the purest brilliancy, does not admit of a still greater degree of clearness, so too, when a man takes care of his body and of his soul, weaving the texture of his good from both, his condition is perfect, and he has found the consummation of his prayers, if there is no commotion in his soul or pain in his body. Whatever delights fall to his lot over and above these two things do not increase his Supreme Good; they merely season it, so to speak, and add spice to it. For the absolute good of man's nature is satisfied with peace in the body and peace in the soul.... What can be added to that which is perfect? Nothing – otherwise that was not perfect to which something has been added.... <u>The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect</u>."* (emphasis added)[9] – Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 66.45-47

"The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect."[10] This is the Platonic argument, restated in Stoic terms and pointed directly at Epicurus's own alleged two-goods formula. If pleasure can always be increased – if no given level of pleasure constitutes the full and complete highest good – then pleasure is by definition always imperfect, always a means rather than an end, always a step on a staircase that has no top. The Stoics held that virtue, being complete and incapable of increase once fully present, passes this test and is therefore the highest good. Pleasure fails it, and Seneca is happy to take Epicurus's two-perspectives-on-the-same thing formula as use it to establish completeness while dismissing everything else – taste, sight, sound, companionship, all the pleasures Epicurus said he could not do without – as mere "seasoning."

This is the argument Epicurus had to answer. And the doctrine that has been so systematically misread is precisely his answer to it.

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## Part Two: The Epicurean Answer – The Full Cup

### Principal Doctrine 3: What It Actually Says

> *"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."*[11] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 3

This is the statement that, more than any other, has been misread as defining the Epicurean goal as the mere absence of pain – the "zero state." On the zero-state reading, PD3 says: the most you can hope for is that pain is gone; pleasure is just what you call that condition; and any vivid, active, positive experience beyond that baseline is irrelevant or secondary and probably damaging.

This reading misses what PD3 was designed to do. Read in the context of Plato's challenge, PD3 is not defining what pleasure is. It is establishing that pleasure has a *limit* – precisely the limit that Plato said it lacked. Epicurus is saying that contrary to what Plato argued, pleasure is not an infinite and therefore incomplete thing. It does have a natural stopping point. That stopping point is reached when all pain has been removed and what remains is pleasure in its pure, unmixed state. At that point, pleasure is complete – it cannot be increased in *magnitude* because it has no remaining admixture of pain to displace. The vessel is full.

This answers Plato's and Seneca's challenge directly: is the ability to increase proof that a thing is imperfect? Yes, allows Epicurus, and pleasure at its fullest cannot be increased in the relevant sense, because what would increase it would be the displacement of more pain. And when all pain is gone, there is no more pain to displace. The cup that is full cannot be made fuller. Pleasure that is pure cannot be made purer.

But notice what this argument does *not* say. It does not say that the contents of the full cup are minimal, passive, or trivial. It does not say that what fills the cup

is merely a nothingness - which is the way normal people then or now who are unfamiliar with the two-feeling doctrine would read "absence of pain." It says only that the measure of fullness – the *limit* – is the point where pain is gone. The question of what fills the cup up to that limit is a separate question entirely, and the answer Epicurus gives to that question is vivid, specific, and unmistakably hedonistic.

### Principal Doctrine 18 and the Comparison of Time

*Principal Doctrine* 18 makes the same point in a complementary way:

> *"The pleasure in the flesh is not increased, when once the pain due to want is removed, but is only varied."*[12]

Once the limit is reached – once the pain of want is gone – pleasure does not increase in *magnitude*, but it is *varied*. The content of a full life changes and shifts and encompasses new experiences. The pleasures of taste, hearing, sight, companionship, memory, and anticipation all contribute to filling the cup; once the cup is full, these pleasures do not make it fuller in the sense of overflowing, but they vary and enrich what fills it. This is a crucial distinction. The zero-state reading takes "is only varied" as a dismissal of active pleasures. It is the opposite: it is the acknowledgment that active pleasures are the content of the full life, even if their variety does not change the fundamental measure of fullness.

The inagery that Lucretius develops makes the same point:

> *"Away from this time forth with thy tears, rascal; a truce to thy complaining: thou decayest after full enjoyment of all the prizes of life... or ever thou thoughtest, death has taken his stand at thy pillow, before thou canst take thy departure sated and filled with good things."*[13] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book III

And again:

> *"Then to be ever feeding the thankless nature of the mind, and never to fill it full and sate it with good things, as the seasons of the year do for us, when they come round and bring their fruits and varied delights, though after all we are never filled with the enjoyments of life, this methinks is to do what is told of the maidens in the flower of their age, to keep pouring water into a perforated vessel which in spite of all can never be filled full."*[14] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book III

The image here is not of a life that has found a still, empty, painless rest. It is of a life that has been *filled* – filled with the prizes and prizes of living, the fruits and delights of the seasons. The failure Lucretius describes is not the failure of pursuing too many pleasures; it is the failure of never securing them properly, of pursuing them in a way that allows them to drain away rather than accumulating in a sound vessel. The goal is fullness, not emptiness. The goal is being *sated and filled with good things*.

Lucretius uses the same vocabulary of fullness, growth, and unbridled natural vigor to describe nature's own abundance in Book V – language worth noting because it is the same imagery, applied to the natural world, that his leaky-vessel passages apply to a well-lived human life:

> *"In the beginning the earth gave forth all kinds of herbage and verdant sheen about the hills and over all the plains; the flowery meadows glittered with the bright green hue, and next in order to the different trees was given a strong and emulous desire of growing up into the air with full unbridled powers."*[15] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book V

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## Part Three: What Fills the Cup

### Epicurus on the Content of Pleasure

Having established that the limit of pleasure is reached when pain is removed, we must ask: what fills the cup up to that limit? On this question, Epicurus was explicit, and his own words leave no room for the zero-state reading. From the opening quotation of this article and from multiple independent ancient sources, Epicurus stated his meaning without ambiguity:

> *"I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful form."*[16] – Epicurus, in Diogenes Laertius, Book X

Cicero, in *Tusculan Disputations*, quotes the same passage directly:

> *"For my part I find no meaning which I can attach to what is termed good, if I take away from it the pleasures obtained by taste, if I take away the pleasures which come from listening to music, if I take away too the charm derived by the eyes from the sight of figures in movement, or other pleasures by any of the senses in the whole man. Nor indeed is it possible to make such a statement as this – that it is joy of the mind which is alone to be reckoned as a good; for I understand by a mind in a state of joy, that it is so, when it has the hope of all the pleasures I have named – that is to say the hope that nature will be free to enjoy them without any blending of pain."*[17] – Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.18.41

This passage is decisive. Epicurus is not merely tolerating bodily and active pleasures as acceptable means to a higher state of calm. He is saying that he cannot even conceive of the good if he abstracts away from these pleasures. They are not secondary decoration. They are what the good is made of. Cicero confirms in the same discussion that Epicurus did not merely mention this once in passing:

> *"For he has not only used the term pleasure, but stated clearly what he meant by it. 'Taste,' he says, 'and embraces and spectacles and music and the shapes of objects fitted to give a pleasant impression to the eyes.'"*[18] – Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.20.46

And notice the precise definition Epicurus adds in the fuller passage above: joy of the mind is real when the mind has the *hope* that nature will be free to enjoy those pleasures without any blending of pain. This is the full cup in miniature. The pleasures of taste, hearing, sight, and the full range of embodied experience are the content. The "without any blending of pain" is the limit, the purity condition, the measure of fullness.[19] Together they give us the Epicurean picture of the best life: filled with vivid, varied pleasures of all kinds, enjoyed in a condition as free from pain as reason and circumstance can achieve.

Torquatus, Cicero's Epicurean spokesman in *On Ends*, states the positive picture directly:

> *"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."*[20] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends*

"Numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind."[21] This is what the full cup looks like from inside. It is not tranquil nothingness. It is a life rich with the kind of experiences that make living worthwhile. Cicero elsewhere confirms, in his own hostile voice, that this is exactly what Epicurus meant and insisted on:

> *"'Does not Epicurus recognize pleasure in your sense?' 'Not always,' said I, 'now and then, I admit, he is only too well-acquainted with it; for he solemnly avows that he cannot even understand what good there can be or where it can be found, apart from that which is derived from food and drink, the delight of the ears, and the grosser forms of gratification.'"*[22] – Cicero, *On Ends* II.3.7[23]

> *"In a number of passages where he is commending that real pleasure which all of us call by the same name, he goes so far as to say that he cannot even imagine any Good that is not connected with pleasure of the kind intended by Aristippus."*[24] – Cicero, *On Ends* II.7.20[25]

> *"But fancy his failing to see how strong a proof it is that the sort of pleasure, without which he declares he has no idea at all what Good means, [is] the pleasure of the palate, of the ears – the kinetic sort of pleasure... he extols it so much that he tells us he is incapable even of imagining what other good there can be."*[26] – Cicero, *On Ends* II.10.29 and I.10.30[27]

> *"Nor did he forgo those other indulgences in the absence of which Epicurus declares that he cannot understand what good is."*[28] – Cicero, *On Ends* II.20.64[29]

> *"According to your school, it is right to try to get money even at some risk; for money procures many very delightful pleasures."*[30] – Cicero, *On Ends* II.17.55[31]

Cicero was not a friendly witness. He wrote all of this as criticism, trying to embarrass the Epicureans with their own commitment to ordinary sensory pleasure. That a hostile critic, closely familiar with Epicurean texts now lost to us, repeatedly and independently confirms the same positive-pleasure reading is strong evidence that this is what the school was known and criticized for saying.

Diogenes of Oinoanda, whose great stone inscription in Lycia preserved Epicurean philosophy for all passersby, announced the purpose of his entire undertaking in terms that leave no ambiguity:

> *"Having already reached the sunset of my life, being almost on the verge of departure from the world on account of old age, I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure."*[32]

An anthem to celebrate the *fullness of pleasure*. This is not the vocabulary of passive tranquility or minimal-desire asceticism. It is the vocabulary of a life well and fully lived. Diogenes elsewhere describes the practical result of Epicurean philosophy in the same terms of active reduction of pain, not mere avoidance of engagement:

> *"These medicines we have put fully to the test; for we have dispelled the fears that grip us without justification, and, as for pains, those that are groundless we have completely excised, while those that are natural we have reduced to an absolute minimum, making their magnitude minute."*[33] – Diogenes of Oinoanda

Nor should the ascetic reading survive contact with the biographical record. Epicurus's own last will and testament, preserved by Diogenes Laertius, lists substantial property and provides for household staff – the record of a man who did not confine himself to a bare "necessaries only" existence, even as he taught that such a life was sufficient if fortune required it.

### Ataraxia and Aponia: What These Terms Actually Mean

*Ataraxia* (freedom from mental disturbance) and *aponia* (freedom from bodily pain) are the Greek terms most often cited as evidence for the zero-state reading. If these are the Epicurean highest goods, the argument goes, then Epicurus was indeed counseling a life of minimal sensation and passive calm.

But this reading treats the negative description as if it exhausted the positive content. "Freedom from mental disturbance" is a description of the mental state of a person who has secured his pleasures, established firm friendships, freed himself from irrational fears about gods and death, and lives in confident possession of a rich and varied life. It is the mental *condition* of the fully pleasured person – not a replacement for pleasure, not a separate higher state, but the name for what the mind is like when pleasure fills it without the contamination of anxiety, fear, and unfulfilled craving.

To describe the goal of Epicurean ethics as *ataraxia* is like describing the goal of a feast as "not being hungry." The description is not wrong – the well-fed person is indeed not hungry – but it captures only the negative condition, not the positive content that produced it. The feast was real. The food was real. The pleasure of eating was real. "Not being hungry" is what that reality looks like from the other side.

Epicurus himself made this connection explicit, and Diogenes Laertius preserves the full context of the statement, including Epicurus's explicit break from the Cyrenaics on precisely this point:

> *"He [Epicurus] differs from the Cyrenaics with regard to pleasure. They do not include under the term the pleasure which is a state of rest, but only that which consists in motion. Epicurus admits both; also pleasure of mind as well as of body, as he states in his work* On Choice and Avoidance*... The words of Epicurus in his work* On Choice *are: 'Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest; joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity.'"*[34] – Epicurus, in Diogenes Laertius, Book X

Both are pleasures. Peace of mind and freedom from pain are real pleasures – they are not merely the absence of bad things but the presence of something good. Joy and delight in motion and activity are equally real pleasures. Epicurus "admits both," Diogenes tells us explicitly, contrasting this with the Cyrenaics who admitted only kinetic pleasure. The Epicurean life makes room for the full range of both.

Metrodorus, Epicurus's closest colleague, is quoted in the same Diogenes Laertius passage making the identical point in his own words: *"Thus Pleasure being conceived both as that species which consists in motion and that which is a state of*

*rest."*[35] And Vatican Saying 14 confirms which of the two is actually being urged on the reader in that particular counsel against procrastination – it is *joy* (*chairon*), an active pleasure, not merely a settled state of rest, that Epicurus tells us not to postpone.[36]

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## Part Four: Clearing Away the Confusions

### The Kinetic/Katastematic Distinction

The technical distinction between "kinetic" (active, moving) pleasure and "katastematic" (stable, resting) pleasure has generated more confusion in Epicurean scholarship than almost any other topic, and most of that confusion is readily avoidable.

The distinction is real but limited in its significance. It is a way of classifying pleasures by type – active experience versus settled condition – not a hierarchy that ranks one above the other. Epicurus acknowledged both types as genuine pleasures. The problem arises when interpreters read "katastematic" as code for "the highest" or "the only truly Epicurean" form of pleasure, and then treat the entire positive content of the Epicurean life – taste, hearing, sight, companionship, joy, delight – as at best a tolerated means to the katastematic state.

This reading cannot be sustained against the texts. Epicurus says he cannot conceive of the good without the pleasures of taste, hearing, and sight. He says joy and delight in motion and activity are pleasures. His school was attacked by the Stoics not for counseling passive calm but for celebrating the pleasures of the flesh. The kinetic/katastematic distinction, to the extent Epicurus himself used it, was a tool of philosophical classification in dialogue with Platonic categories – not the organizing principle of Epicurean life.

For practical purposes, the distinction matters mainly as a warning against two opposite errors. The first error is thinking that Epicurean ethics is simply unlimited sensory indulgence with no regard for consequences – the vulgar hedonism charge. The second error, which concerns us more here, is thinking that Epicurean ethics is essentially passive minimalism – the zero-state charge. The full cup

model avoids both: it insists on pleasure as real and vivid content, and on reason as the tool for filling the cup as fully as possible while keeping it sound.

### The Natural and Necessary Classification

Similarly, the classification of desires into natural-and-necessary, natural-but-not-necessary, and neither-natural-nor-necessary has been misread as a license for asceticism. On this misreading, the good Epicurean limits himself to the first category and treats everything beyond as problematic excess.

This misreading is directly contradicted by the purpose of the classification, which is analytical rather than prescriptive. The classification is a tool for understanding which desires are easily and cheaply satisfied and which lead into anxious, compulsive pursuit that generates more pain than pleasure. It identifies the *floor* of happiness – what is sufficient to secure the foundation – not the *ceiling* of what may be pursued.

Epicurus valued friendship as the greatest pleasure available to human beings, and friendship far exceeds the merely natural-and-necessary. He hosted dinners, enjoyed wine, enjoyed intellectual conversation. He wrote to friends and colleagues across the Greek world. The point of noting that bread and water suffice in an emergency is not that bread and water define the Epicurean ideal, but that the foundation of happiness is secure and accessible even when fortune is unkind. From that secure foundation, the full cup can be pursued.

Diogenes of Oinoanda states the correct relationship plainly:

> *"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 inopportunely 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."*[37] – Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 32

The virtues – including the practical reasoning that classifies desires and helps us choose wisely among pleasures – are means to pleasure, not ends in themselves. And pleasure, not minimalism, is the end.

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## Part Five: The Ancient Witnesses

The ancient sources that touched on Epicurean philosophy, friend and foe alike, understood Epicurus to be teaching active, vivid pleasure as the goal of life. The following passages, drawn from across the ancient world and spanning several centuries, constitute a consistent record of what Epicurus actually meant. Many of them are hostile: they are quoting Epicurus's own commitment to ordinary sensory pleasure precisely in order to attack it. That hostility is itself evidence – no one bothers attacking a philosopher for teaching what everyone already agrees is respectable.

**Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XII, 546E:** "[Aristippus and his followers were not alone] in welcoming kinetic pleasure ... Epicurus and his followers did the same."[38] Athenaeus then quotes the treatise *On the End of Life*: "I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful form."[39]

**Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XII, 546F:** "And Epicurus says, 'The principle and the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach; even wisdom and culture must be referred to this.'"[40]

**Lucian, *The Double Indictment* 21 (Epicurus portrayed as speaking):** "[One who] ran away to Pleasure of his own free will, cutting the meshes of [Stoic] logic as if they were bonds, because he had the spirit of a human being, not of a dolt, and thought pain painful, as indeed it is, and pleasure pleasant."[41] A few lines later, in the same dialogue, the Stoa puts the question directly and Epicurus does not equivocate: *"Stoa: Do you consider pain bad? Epicurus: Yes. Stoa: And pleasure good? Epicurus: Certainly so!"*[42]

**Cicero, *In Defense of Publius Sestius* 10.23:** "[Publius Clodius] praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure [the Epicureans].... He added that these same men were quite right in saying that the wise do everything for their own interests; that no sane man should engage in public affairs; that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures."[43] The Latin, which can be verified independently, is unambiguous:

*nihil esse praestabilius otiosa vita, plena et conferta voluptatibus* – a life full and crammed (*plena et conferta*) with pleasures.

**Cicero, *On Ends* II.27.88:** "Isn't pleasure more desirable the longer it lasts? On what ground then does Epicurus speak of a deity (for so he always does) as happy and immortal? Take away his everlasting life, and Jove is no happier than Epicurus. Each of them enjoys the Chief Good, that is to say, pleasure. Wherein then is he inferior to a god, except that a god lives forever?"[44]

**Cicero, *Against Lucius Calpurnius Piso* 27.66:** "It is his habit in all his discussions to attach higher value to the pleasures of the belly than to the delights of the eye and the ear."[45]

**Zeno of Sidon, by way of Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.17.38:** "Blessed is he who has the enjoyment of present pleasure and the assurance that he would have enjoyment either throughout life or for a great part of life without the intervention of pain, or should pain come, that it would be short-lived if extreme, but if prolonged it would still allow more that was pleasant than evil."[46]

**Varro, by way of Saint Augustine, *City of God* XIX.1:** "There are four things that men naturally seek... pleasure, which is an agreeable activity of physical perception, or repose, the state in which the individual suffers no bodily discomfort, or both of these (which Epicurus calls by the single name of pleasure)..."[47] Both active pleasure and rest from pain are included under the single Epicurean term – not as rivals but as aspects of the same whole.

**Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On the Soul* II.19:** "The Epicureans held that what is first congenial to us, without qualification, is pleasure. But they say that as we get older, this pleasure articulates itself in many ways."[48] Pleasure first and articulated into its full variety through a well-lived life.

**Plutarch, *That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible* 3, 1088C:** "Epicurus has imposed a limit on pleasures that applies to all of them alike: the removal of all pain. For he believes that our nature adds to pleasure only up to the point where pain is abolished and does not allow it any further increase in magnitude (although the pleasure, when the state of painlessness is reached, admits of certain unessential variations). But to proceed to this point, accompanied by desire, is our stint of pleasure, and the journey is indeed short

and quick."[49] Plutarch here is stating PD3 and PD18 in his own words, as an ancient reader who understood the doctrine perfectly well – and then goes on to attack it as trivial, which is precisely the objection this article addresses.

**Plutarch, same work, 4, 1089A:** Describing what he takes to be the Epicurean position – "the superiority of the Sage lies above all in this: vividly remembering and keeping intact in himself the sights and feelings and movements associated with pleasure" – a description of an active, memory-rich engagement with pleasure, not a passive emptiness.[50]

**Plutarch, same work, 4, 1089D:** "It is this, I believe, that has driven them... to take refuge in the 'painlessness' and the 'stable condition of the flesh,' supposing that the pleasurable life is found in thinking of this state as about to occur in people or as being achieved; for the 'stable and settled condition of the flesh,' and the 'trustworthy expectation' of this condition contain, they say, the highest and the most assured delight for men who are able to reflect."[51]

**Plutarch, same work, 5, 1090B:** Noting the fragility of the future – "the future, like the weather, is always uncertain" – as a problem Plutarch presses against the Epicurean reliance on a stable, expected condition of pleasure.[52]

**Plutarch, same work, 7, 1091A:** "Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their 'thing delighted' – their good – is an escape from ills.... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: 'That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about, prating meaninglessly about the good.'"[53]

**Plutarch, same work, 16, 1098D**, quoting Metrodorus's *Letter to His Brother Timocrates*: "We are not called to save the nation or get crowned by it for wisdom; what is called for, my dear Timocrates, is to eat and to drink wine, gratifying the belly without harming it.... It made me both happy and confident to have learned from Epicurus how to gratify the belly properly.... The belly, Timocrates, my man of wisdom, is the region that contains the highest end."[54]

**Plutarch, same work, 17, 1098D:** "Indeed these people, you might say, describing a circle with the belly as center and radius, circumscribe within it the whole area of pleasure."[55]

**Cf. Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 30, 1125A:** "It is the men who look with contempt on all these things as old wives' tales, and think that our good is to be found in the belly and the other passages by which pleasure makes her entry."[56] **And 2, 1108C:** "...by those who keep shouting that the good is to be found in the belly."[57]

**Plutarch, *On Peace of Mind* 2, 465F:** "Not even Epicurus believes that men who are eager for honor and glory should lead an inactive life, but that they should fulfill their natures by engaging in politics and entering public life, on the ground that, because of their natural dispositions, they are more likely to be disturbed and harmed by inactivity if they do not obtain what they desire."[58] Even public, active engagement with the world – not withdrawal – is the Epicurean counsel for those whose own nature calls for it.

**Antiochus of Ascalon, by way of Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* II.21, 178.43:** "Of those that are ruled by pleasure are the Cyrenaics and Epicurus; for these expressly said that to live pleasantly was the chief end, and that pleasure was the only perfect good. Epicurus also says that the removal of pain is pleasure."[59] **And 178.46:** "Epicurus also says that the removal of pain is pleasure; and says that that is to be preferred, which first attracts from itself to itself, being, that is, wholly in motion" – an ancient testimony that Epicurus valued kinetic, actively-attracting pleasure in its own right, not merely as a path to rest.[60]

**Alciphron, *Letters* III.55.8** (Autocletus to Hetoemaristus, "Gatecrasher" to "Prompt-to-Breakfast"): "Zenocrates the Epicurean took the harp-girls in his arms, gazing upon them from half-closed eyes with a languishing and melting look, and saying that this was 'tranquility of the flesh' and 'the full intensity of pleasure.'"[61] Whatever one makes of the anecdote's reliability, it shows that even a mocking outsider's caricature of an Epicurean took for granted that "tranquility" and "full intensity of pleasure" were being spoken of as the same thing, not as rivals.[62]

**Porphyry, *On Abstinence* I.53:** "Epicurus rightly surmised that we should beware of food which we want to enjoy and which we pursue, but find disagreeable

once we get it.... For this reason we should guard against excess even of simple things, and in all cases we must examine what happens as a result of enjoyment or possession, how big a thing it is, and whether it relieves any trouble of body or soul."[63] Prudent management of active pleasures, not their rejection.

**Saint Augustine, *Against the Academicians* III.7.16** (quoting an imagined Cicero): "If Zeno or Chrysippus were asked who the wise man is, he'll reply that the wise man is the one whom he himself has described. In return, Epicurus... will maintain instead that the wise man is the one most skilled at catching pleasures.... Epicurus, like Bacchus, has called together a drunken mob from his Gardens to aid him against this onslaught!... Elevating the name of pleasure as agreeableness and calm, with popular support, Epicurus passionately insists that without pleasure nobody could seem happy."[64]

**Saint Augustine, *Confessions* VI.16:** "I argued in those days with my friends Alypius and Nebridius concerning the limits of good and evil. Determining, in my judgment, that Epicurus should have won the garland, had I not verily believed that there remained a life for the soul after the body was dead.... And so I put the question: suppose we were to be immortal, and were to live in perpetual enjoyment of bodily pleasures, and that without fear of losing – why should we not then be fully happy?"[65] Even Augustine, no friend of Epicureanism, concedes that a life of active bodily pleasure was the Epicurean promise, and that its only defect (in his eyes) was mortality, not emptiness.

**Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* III.7.7:** "Epicurus thinks that the highest good is in the pleasure of the mind. Aristippus holds that it is in the pleasure of the body."[66] **And III.17.38** (paraphrasing Epicurus): "Let us serve pleasure, then, in whatever way we can, for in a short time we will be nothing whatsoever. Let us suffer no day, therefore, no point of time to flow by for us without pleasure, lest, since we ourselves are at sometime to perish, the very fact that we live may perish."[67]

**Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 92.6** (arguing, hostilely, against a purely bodily reading of pleasure): "A pleasant physical sensation affects this life of ours; why therefore, do you hesitate to say that all is well with a man just because all is well with his appetite? And do you rate... among men, the person whose Supreme

Good is a matter of flavors and colors and sounds?" – again confirming, even as he mocks it, that this is the position Seneca understood Epicureans to hold.[68]

These are not the descriptions of a philosophy of passive tranquility. They are consistent, across hostile and sympathetic sources alike, in their identification of Epicurean philosophy with vigorous, varied, active pleasure as the content of the best life.

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## Part Six: Modern Scholarly Support

The full cup reading is not a modern invention by me. It has real support in the scholarly literature, including from writers whose analysis independently converges on the same conclusion: Epicurus did not teach a minimal, passive, pain-avoidance-only ethic.

Raphael Woolf, in his chapter "Pleasure and Desire" in the *Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (2009), directly confronts and rejects the ascetic caricature:

> *"It would... be a poignant historical irony if the figure of the Epicurean as lover of luxury should be so far removed from actual Epicurean doctrine, if this sets as a condition of the good life that one abstain from luxury and aim to satisfy only one's basic needs. Fortunately, it is a mistake to read Epicurus in quite this way.... Luxury, according to Epicurus, is in fact to be welcomed, just so long as its possession does not detract from the maintenance or attainment of a pain and trouble free state.... We are not told to confine ourselves to the occasional bout of luxury, as if our task is to fend off all those other luxurious opportunities that are likely to befall us."*[69] – Raphael Woolf, "Pleasure and Desire," *Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, 2009[70]

Woolf goes on to make a point directly relevant to the calculus of choice at the heart of the full cup model: *"Mention of the calculus does... strengthen the thought that an Epicurean would be expected to choose luxury over simplicity (say business class over economy) so long as equanimity were not thereby compromised."*[71]

Mathew Wenham, writing on Cicero's role in shaping the standard interpretation, locates the origin of the zero-state reading precisely where this article loc-

ates it – in Platonic categories imported through Cicero, not in Epicurus's own texts:

> *"The standard interpretation of the concept of katastematic pleasure in Epicurus has it referring to 'static' states from which feeling is absent. We owe the prevalence of this interpretation to Cicero's account of Epicureanism in his* De Finibus Bonorum Et Malorum*. Cicero's account, in turn, is based on the Platonic theory of pleasure.... I claim that it is not Epicurus, but the standard interpretation that generates these errors."*[72] – Mathew Wenham, on Cicero's interpretation of katastematic pleasure

Boris Nikolsky's 2001 paper "Epicurus on Pleasure" goes further, questioning whether the kinetic / katastematic classification is even authentically Epicurean in the rigid, two-tier form usually attributed to him:[73]

> *"This classification, usually regarded as authentic, confronts us with a number of problems and contradictions.... From the [texts that do not mention the kinetic/static distinction] there emerges a concept of pleasure as a single and not two-fold notion, while such terms as 'motion' and 'state' describe not two different phenomena but only two characteristics of the same phenomenon.... I argue that the idea of Epicurus' classification of pleasures is based on a misinterpretation of Epicurus' concept in Academic doxography, which tended to contrapose it to doctrines of other schools, above all to the Cyrenaics' views."*[74] – Boris Nikolsky, "Epicurus on Pleasure," *Phronesis*, 2001[75]

Gosling and Taylor, in their standard reference work *The Greeks on Pleasure* (1982), reach a closely related conclusion in their chapter on katastematic and kinetic pleasures:

> *"Epicurus was not advocating the pursuit of some passionless state which could only be called one of pleasure in order to defend a paradox. Rather he was advocating a life where pain is excluded and we are left with familiar physical pleasures. The resultant life may be simple, but it is straightforwardly pleasant."*[76] – Gosling & Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure*, 1982

Norman DeWitt, in *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (1954), made the same point decades earlier, and identified the same error this article identifies – reading Epicurus as if he had "emptied pleasure of all positive content":[77]

> *"A modern Platonist, ill informed on the true intent of Epicurus, has this to say: 'What... is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by emptying pleasure of all positive content?' This ignores the fact that this was but one of the definitions of pleasure offered by Epicurus, that he recognized kinetic as well as static pleasures. It ignores also the fact that Epicurus took personal pleasure in public festivals and encouraged his disciples to attend them and that regular banquets were a part of the ritual of the sect."*[78] – Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, 1954[79]

Frances Wright's *A Few Days in Athens* (1822), a novelistic but sympathetic account of the Garden, depicts the same active, socially rich, aesthetically engaged household – music, art, conversation, shared meals – without treating the kinetic / katastematic distinction as significant enough to even mention. And Pierre Gassendi, in his seventeenth-century *Life and Doctrine of Epicurus*, defended the same active picture against the charge of passivity in almost the same vessel-imagery this article uses:

> *"As we would not have the life of a wise man to be like a torrent or rapid stream, so we would not it should be like a standing dead-pool: but rather like a river gliding on silently and quietly. We therefore hold his pleasure is not unactive, but that which reason makes firm to him."*[80] – Pierre Gassendi, *Life and Doctrine of Epicurus* (trans. Thomas Stanley, *The History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, 1660, p. 233)

None of these scholars is cited here as agreeing with every detail of the full cup model as presented in this article. But each of them, working independently and from different angles, arrives at the same core conclusion: the passive, minimal, "zero-state" Epicurus is a construction of his critics and their heirs, not a reading required by the texts themselves.

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## Part Seven: Why the Zero-State Reading Persists and Why It Matters

### The Distorting Filters

The zero-state reading of Epicurus did not arise from careful reading of the texts. It arose from at least three cultural filters that have operated on the interpretation of Epicurean philosophy for centuries.

The **Stoic filter** is the most ancient. Stoics found it useful to read Epicurus as essentially a failed Stoic – someone who wanted to call the wise man's condition "pleasure" but who, when pressed, turned out to mean something very like the Stoic *apatheia* or freedom from passion. On this reading, the Epicurean sage is not fundamentally different from the Stoic sage; he just uses different vocabulary. This reading served the Stoics by domesticating their most vigorous opponent, and it has had remarkable staying power in scholarship that has absorbed Stoic assumptions without fully recognizing them as such.

The **Judeo-Christian filter** treats pleasure as philosophically suspect and looks for ways to rescue Epicurus from the implications of his own doctrine. If Epicurus really taught pleasure, he must have meant something elevated, spiritual, and far removed from the pleasures of the body. On this reading, "pleasure" becomes a code word for inner peace, and the rich positive content of Epicurean life is suppressed in favor of a picture that is theologically more comfortable. Lactantius's mockery of Epicurus as a philosopher fit only for "the bedridden," quoted above, is this filter operating in its earliest and least disguised form.

The **Humanist filter** assumes that the good person is defined by rational self-restraint and the subordination of desire to principle. Epicurus, on this reading, must have been teaching exactly that – the reduction of desire to what is natural and necessary, the cultivation of rational calm, the subordination of the passions to reason. The full, vivid, bodily pleasure that Epicurus explicitly describes becomes an embarrassment to be explained away.

All three filters operate in the direction of the zero-state reading. All three are contradicted by the texts. And all three have contributed to a picture of Epicurus

that is, as the ancient Stoics and Academics attacking him recognized, exactly the wrong picture.

### Why It Matters

The zero-state reading matters because it transforms Epicurean philosophy from a vigorous and positive account of what makes life worth living into a withdrawal and resignation - a counsel of minimal expectation that is, in practice, indistinguishable from the life-denial it was designed to oppose. If the goal is simply to be undisturbed – to feel as little as possible, to want as little as possible, to be satisfied with the mere absence of pain – then Epicurean philosophy offers nothing that a Stoic or a Buddhist or a Christian mystic could not equally offer, and does so less systematically than any of them.

Reframing the issue as a full cup of pleasure restores what was actually there. The goal is a life as Cicero stated – *plena et conferta voluptatibus* – full and crammed with pleasures. The vessel must be sound so that pleasures do not drain away; reason must be employed so that pleasures do not generate greater pains; the foundation must be secure so that the pursuit of further pleasures does not depend on circumstances beyond our control. But the goal is fullness, not emptiness. The goal is a life in which, as Torquatus put it, life holds "numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind."[81]

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## Conclusion: The Answer Epicurus Gave

Plato asked: can pleasure be the highest good if it has no limit? And he answered his own question: no, it cannot.

Epicurus answered differently. Pleasure does have a limit. The limit is the fullness of a life from which pain has been displaced by the pleasures of taste, hearing, sight, companionship, intellectual activity, memory, and anticipation – all the pleasures that, as Epicurus said, he could not conceive of the good without. When those pleasures are secured in full measure, without the admixture of pain that comes from irrational fear, anxious craving, and unfulfilled natural need, the cup is full. It cannot be increased in magnitude, only varied in content. And the variation it admits is the full rich variety of a life well and actively lived.

*Ataraxia* and *aponia* are the names for what the cup is like when it is full – mental peace and bodily ease as the condition of a life filled with genuine pleasure. They are not the content of the cup. They are its condition of fullness. The content is what Epicurus said: the pleasures of taste, of hearing, of sight, of sex, of friendship, of philosophy, of memory, of the confident expectation of future good.

That is the full cup. That is the Epicurean answer to Plato. And that is the life Epicurus taught.

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## Key Texts Referenced

**Epicurus** - *Principal Doctrines* 3 and 18 (Bailey translation, via Diogenes Laertius Book X) - Bailey Fragment 62 (net-pleasure calculation) - *Letter to Menoeceus* (Diogenes Laertius 10.128–132)[82] - *On Choice and Avoidance* (preserved by Diogenes Laertius 10.136) - Last Will and Testament (preserved by Diogenes Laertius) - Vatican Saying 14[83]

**Epicurean and Sympathetic Sources** - Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Books I–II - Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragments 3, 32, and 37, and the "medicines"/"anthem" fragments (Smith translation) - Metrodorus, *Letter to His Brother Timocrates* (via Plutarch) - Frances Wright, *A Few Days in Athens* (1822) - Pierre Gassendi, *Life and Doctrine of Epicurus* (trans. Thomas Stanley)

**Lucretius** - *De Rerum Natura* Books III and V (Bailey translation)

**Plato and the Stoic/Platonic Challenge** - Plato, *Philebus* (on limits and purity of pleasure) - Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, Book I Letter XVI, and 66.45–47 (cited as the Stoic/Platonic challenge Epicurus was answering, not as a guide to Epicurean doctrine) - Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 92.6

**Hostile and Neutral Ancient Witnesses** - Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.18.41, III.20.46; *In Defense of Publius Sestius* 10.23; *On Ends* II.3.7, II.7.20, I.10.30, II.10.29, II.17.55, II.20.64, II.27.88; *Against Lucius Calpurnius Piso* 27.66 - Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XII, 546E and 546F - Lucian, *The Double Indictment* 21 - Zeno of Sidon, by way of Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.17.38 - Varro, by way of Saint Augustine, *City of God* XIX.1 - Alexander of Aphrodisias,

*On the Soul* II.19 - Plutarch, *That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible* 3 (1088C), 4 (1089A, 1089D), 5 (1090B), 7 (1091A), 16 (1098D), 17 (1098D) - Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 2 (1108C), 30 (1125A) - Plutarch, *On Peace of Mind* 2 (465F) - Antiochus of Ascalon, by way of Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* II.21 (178.43, 178.46) - Alciphron, *Letters* III.55.8 - Porphyry, *On Abstinence* I.53 - Saint Augustine, *Against the Academicians* III.7.16; *Confessions* VI.16 - Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* III.7.7, III.8.10, III.17.38

**Modern Scholarship** - Raphael Woolf, "Pleasure and Desire," *Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (2009)[84] - Mathew Wenham, on Cicero's interpretation of katastematic pleasure in Epicurus - Boris Nikolsky, "Epicurus on Pleasure," *Phronesis* (2001)[85] - Gosling & Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (1982), ch. 19 - Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (1954), ch. 12

→ *Notes for this article*

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# The Norm Is Pleasure Too: Why Epicurus Was Right to Call the Normal State 'Pleasure

*"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 anyone who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain."*[1] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book One, 38

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## Introduction: The Claim That Changed Everything

Among all the philosophical innovations Epicurus brought to the ancient world, one stands apart for its combination of simplicity, depth, and practical consequences. It is not the atomic theory of matter, not the refutation of divine providence, not the analysis of desires into necessary and unnecessary. It is this: the normal state of a living being – the state of not being in pain, not being disturbed, simply existing and functioning without any particular external stimulus – is a state of pleasure.

Not a neutral state. Not an empty state. Not a zero from which pleasure begins when stimulation arrives. Pleasure itself.

Norman DeWitt, one of the most penetrating modern scholars of Epicurus, identified this as the decisive move in the philosophy:

*"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] – Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, p. 240

This article examines DeWitt's three claims in sequence: that the name *ought* to be applied to the normal state; that *reason* justifies the application; and that human beings *are happier* for understanding and accepting it. Together these claims constitute the philosophical case for what we might call the norm of pleasure – the recognition that the baseline of conscious life, rightly understood, is not neutral but good.

This article is a companion to "The Full Cup Model" on this site, which examines how the limit of pleasure answers the Platonic challenge that pleasure cannot be the highest good. The present article addresses a prior and more fundamental question: what makes the normal state pleasurable at all? Understanding this is the foundation on which everything else in Epicurean ethics rests.

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## Part One: The Two-State Reality

The philosophical starting point is the structure of feeling itself. Epicurus, drawing on the canonical framework he had established as the foundation of all knowledge, identified two and only two internal sensations available to living creatures: pleasure and pain.

> *"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."*[3] – Diogenes Laertius, Book X, 34

This is not a preference or a convention. It is a claim about the structure of experience. Nature has provided all living creatures with exactly two internal

guides: one that reports what is congenial to the creature's nature (pleasure) and one that reports what is working against it (pain). These two cover the entire field of feeling. There is no third sensation alongside them.

The immediate consequence is decisive: if pain is absent, pleasure is present. Not "something" is present. Not "a neutral state" is present. Pleasure is present – because pleasure is what we call the sensation that is not pain, and when pain is not there, that sensation is what remains.

Torquatus makes the argument with admirable directness in response to Cicero's persistent objection that "freedom from pain" and "pleasure" are different things:

> *"Surely anyone who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain."*[4] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book One, 38

And when Cicero presses him again – surely there must be an intermediate state, neither in pleasure nor in pain? – Torquatus holds firm:

> *"I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too."*[5] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book Two, 16

"In the greatest pleasure too."[6] Not in a minimal or marginal pleasure. In the greatest pleasure, because the limit of pleasure – as *Principal Doctrine* 3 establishes – is reached when all pain is gone. The cup is full. What Cicero wants to call a neutral intermediate state is, on the Epicurean analysis, simply the state of full pleasure correctly identified.

The same point is made from the other direction by *Principal Doctrine* 3:

> *"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."*[7] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 3

This is the two-state reality stated as a logical consequence: where pleasure is, pain is not. And conversely: where pain is not, pleasure is. The two states are not merely contraries that admit of degrees. They are the exhaustive and mutually exclusive options for conscious experience, and the presence of one entails the absence of the other.

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## Part Two: The Name Ought to Be Applied

Cicero's objection – that Epicurus is calling two different things by one name – sounds like a serious logical complaint. It is not. DeWitt calls it "superficial and captious," and the force of that verdict becomes clear once we examine what the objection actually requires.

Cicero wants to say: there is active pleasure (the pleasure of drinking when thirsty, of hearing beautiful music, of intellectual engagement), and there is the absence of pain (the condition of not being hungry, not being disturbed, not being in physical distress). These are, he insists, different things, and calling both "pleasure" is a verbal deception.

But the Epicurean reply is that Cicero's analysis depends on a hidden assumption: that there is a neutral third state between pleasure and pain from which both can be viewed as departures. Remove that assumption – which the two-state analysis of feeling removes – and the objection collapses. If there are only two states, and one is pain and the other is pleasure, then the absence of pain is not a neutral state distinct from both; it is the presence of pleasure, seen from one side rather than the other.

This is exactly the point that Torquatus presses in response to Cicero's objection about the hand:

> *"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."*[8] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book One, 39

The hand that is free from pain does not need any additional sensation to be in pleasure. It is already in pleasure. It is not in want. The desire for further stimula-

tion would only arise if the state of pain-freedom were somehow incomplete or deficient – but it is not deficient, because it is already the full condition of pleasure.

Aulus Gellius, the second-century Latin author and grammarian, provides a useful parallel from literary usage that helps explain why the negative form of a term can legitimately express the positive extreme of its opposite:

> *"Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain... just as he expressed abhorrence of the 'unpraised' man by the denial of praise, so he abhorred the 'unlovable' by the denial of love."*[9] – Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*

Gellius shows that this linguistic pattern – expressing the fullest positive by denying its opposite – was well-established in Greek literary practice long before Epicurus. Homer praises heroes by denying cowardice. Virgil expresses loathing by denying beauty. Epicurus defines the greatest pleasure by the removal of all pain. The form is consistent; the usage is justified. What was criticized as philosophical sleight of hand was in fact a recognized and legitimate way of expressing a maximum by reference to the elimination of the contrary.

But Gellius's parallel also reveals something deeper. These are not arbitrary linguistic conventions. Each of them reflects a genuine truth about the thing being described. The most praiseworthy man is the one who has nothing blameworthy about him. The most pleasurable state is the one that has no pain in it. The negative formulation captures the essence of the positive because in each case the positive is constituted precisely by the elimination of its contrary. The name of pleasure *ought* to be applied to the pain-free state because that state IS what pleasure most fully is.

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## Part Three: Reason Justifies the Application

The second of DeWitt's three claims – that reason justifies calling the normal state pleasure – is established by the *Letter to Menoeceus* and by two *Principal Doctrines* that have often been read as technical fine points but are in fact central to the whole system.

Epicurus states the matter directly in the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

> *"By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul."*[10] – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, Diogenes Laertius 10.131

This is not offered as one definition of pleasure among several, or as a description of a special elevated kind of pleasure superior to ordinary pleasure. It is offered as the definition of what Epicureans mean by pleasure. The term's extension to the pain-free state is not an awkward add-on; it is primary.

The philosophical justification for this extension follows from the structure of the canon. Nature has given living creatures pleasure and pain as guides. These guides report on whether the creature's condition is congenial or hostile to its nature. A creature in the normal, healthy, pain-free state is in a condition congenial to its nature – which is precisely what the feeling of pleasure reports. There is no need for external stimulation to make the condition pleasurable; the condition is pleasurable because it is what a living creature's nature is meant to be.

*Principal Doctrine* 18 and *Principal Doctrine* 19 establish that reason is required to fully grasp this:

> *"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."*[11] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 18

> *"Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure."*[12] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 19

Both doctrines emphasize *reason* as the faculty through which the limit and nature of pleasure are understood. This is not because pleasure is a difficult or obscure thing in itself, but because our ordinary unreflective view of pleasure is distorted by habits of thought that look for pleasure only in vivid external stimulation and regard the baseline state as empty. Reason is needed to correct this distortion and see what is actually there: a foundation of pleasure that is fully real, requiring no supplement, constituting the highest state from which all further pleasures are variations rather than additions.

DeWitt's commentary on Plutarch's hostile summary of this point is worth noting:

> *"The stable condition of well-being in the flesh and the confident hope of its continuance means the most exquisite and infallible of joys for those who are capable of figuring the problem out."*[13] – DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, p. 233

"For those who are capable of figuring the problem out."[14] This is not mysticism or esotericism. It is the recognition that understanding pleasure correctly – seeing that the normal state is pleasurable, not neutral – requires philosophical work. The person who has not done that work will continue to experience the pain-free state as somehow incomplete, always waiting for the next stimulation to begin enjoying. The person who has done the work recognizes that the enjoyment is already there, fully and completely, waiting not to begin but to be recognized.

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## Part Four: Human Beings Are Happier for Understanding This

The third of DeWitt's claims is the most practically important: that people are happier for reasoning and believing that the normal state is pleasure. This may seem like an assertion rather than an argument, but there is a genuine philosophical point behind it.

Torquatus spells out what the life of the person who understands this looks like:

> *"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... And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation."*[15] – Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* Book One, 62

The key phrase is "there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains."[16] This is only possible if the normal, undisturbed state is genuinely pleasurable – because any realistic life will contain many moments without vivid external stimulation, many moments of simple quiet health, simple ease, simple companionship. If those moments are neutral or empty, then happiness depends entirely on a constant supply of external stimulation, which no life can guarantee. But if those moments are genuinely pleasurable – if the norm itself is pleasure – then happiness is available at almost every waking moment of a well-conducted life, and only actual bodily or mental pain can displace it.

This is what Epicurus demonstrated on his deathbed. Writing to Idomeneus on the last day of his life, suffering severe physical pain from a diseased bladder:

> *"On this truly happy day of my life, as I am at the point of death, I write this to you. The disease in my bladder and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their natural severity: but against all this is the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you."*[17] – Epicurus to Idomeneus, in Diogenes Laertius

The gladness of mind at the memory of past conversations – this is not vivid external stimulation. It is the pleasure that remains available in the mind even when the body suffers severely: the pleasure of memory, of friendship, of a philosophical life well conducted. This pleasure is genuine because Epicurus understood that it was genuine, that the normal state of a mind engaged with its own goods is pleasurable even in the absence of new external input. He did not wait for stimulation to make him happy. The norm – the remembered pleasure of past conversations, the quiet of a mind free from fear even in physical suffering – was enough.

Lucretius captures the positive content of this baseline in a passage that shows how normal bodily and mental experience already participates in pleasure even without extraordinary stimulation:

> *"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."*[18] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book III

The point is that pleasure is present wherever pain is absent, even when other parts of the same person suffer. The foot in pain does not negate the pleasure of the head that is free from pain. This is not paradox but observation: pleasure and pain are both real wherever they occur, and the presence of one in one part does not eliminate the other in another part. The implication for the full life is that pleasure is always present somewhere as long as we are alive and not entirely overwhelmed – which means the foundation is always there, always available, always a source of genuine good.

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## Part Five: The Philosophical Significance

### Why Critics Kept Misunderstanding

The persistence of Cicero's objection – that Epicurus was making a verbal error, calling two different things by one name – reflects a genuine philosophical difficulty. Anyone raised within a framework that assumes a neutral ground between pleasure and pain will find the Epicurean claim initially counterintuitive. Our ordinary language and ordinary psychology do distinguish between the vivid pleasure of drinking when thirsty and the quiet, unremarkable condition of not being thirsty at all. The latter does not feel like "pleasure" in the ordinary sense of that word.

The Epicurean response is not to deny this phenomenological observation but to explain it. The unremarkable quality of the normal state is not evidence that it is neutral. It is evidence that we are not attending to it. The person who has drunk and is no longer thirsty is in a state of pleasure with respect to thirst – but because the pleasure of satisfying thirst is now complete and the feeling of thirst is gone, there is nothing that demands attention. Pleasure that demands nothing is easy to overlook. It does not mean there is nothing there.

This is where reason comes in, as *Principal Doctrines* 18 and 19 emphasize. Reason teaches us to attend to the state we are in and to recognize its quality correctly. A person who has learned to do this – who has, as Torquatus says, made

the present "so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness" – finds that the normal state is not empty at all.[19] It is quietly and firmly good.

### The Practical Transformation

The practical transformation this understanding produces is not dramatic in the way that a religious conversion or a philosophical revelation is often imagined to be. It is quieter and more durable than that. It is the recognition, available at almost any moment of ordinary life, that this – the present moment of health, of ease, of companionship, of intellectual engagement, of simple undisturbed existence – is good. Not waiting to be good. Not on the way to being good when the next pleasure arrives. Already good, now, as it stands.

This recognition is what Torquatus describes when he says the wise man is "continually happy" and experiences "more pleasures than pains" at every moment.[20] It is what Epicurus demonstrated when he called his last day "blissful" despite severe physical suffering. And it is what Diogenes of Oinoanda was celebrating when he wrote of wanting to compose "an anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure" before his death – not an anthem to the occasional vivid stimulation of a life, but to the fullness of a life well and pleasurably lived from its normal foundation outward.[21]

The norm is pleasure. Not as a consolation for the absence of better things. Not as a philosophical technicality. As the genuine, correctly understood, fully real quality of the state that constitutes the foundation of a happy life.

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## Key Texts Referenced

- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 3, 18, and 19 (Bailey translation, via Diogenes Laertius Book X)
- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Diogenes Laertius 10.131)[22]
- Epicurus to Idomeneus (Diogenes Laertius, final letter)
- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Books One and Two, sections 30, 38, 39, 56–57, 62; Book Two sections 9, 11, 16

- Diogenes Laertius, Book X, 34 (on the two internal sensations)
- Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book III, lines 98ff.
- Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* (on the linguistic pattern of expressing the positive through negation of its contrary)
- Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1954), pp. 233 and 240
- Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 3 (on the anthem to the fullness of pleasure)
- Companion article: "The Full Cup Model: Pleasure, Purity, and the Limit That Answers Plato," EpicurusToday.com
- Companion article: "Two Names for One Reality," EpicurusToday.com


→ *Notes for this article*

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# Natural Justice: The Epicurean Account and Why It Matters Against Platonism, Stoicism, Humanism, and Libertarianism

## Introduction: Why Justice Is A Sharp Dividing Line

Of all the areas where Epicurean philosophy departs from the traditions that have most shaped Western thought, none is more important or more consistently misread than the account of justice. Physics and the nature of the gods are philosophically foundational, but the theory of justice is where philosophy meets daily life most directly – where the question of what we owe to each other, why we owe it, and what happens when circumstances change is not an abstract matter but a practical one with real consequences for how people organize their communities and their lives.

On the question of justice, Epicurus took a position that was radical in the ancient world and remains radical today: justice is not eternal, not universal, not written into the structure of the cosmos by divine intelligence, and not grounded in an abstract ideal that stands above and apart from the natural human experience of pleasure and pain. Justice is a practical compact among people who are capable of making agreements, grounded entirely in the mutual advantage that the agreement provides, and conditioned throughout on that advantage continuing to hold. When circumstances change and the agreement ceases to benefit the parties, the agreement is no longer just – which means that breaking it is not unjust but natural.

This position directly contradicts every major tradition in Western thought that has addressed the subject. Plato held that justice is one of the eternal Forms, a

perfect and unchanging ideal that transcends any particular political arrangement and measures all arrangements against itself. Cicero, in the *Republic*, built a theory of natural law as eternal right reason embedded in the cosmos, identical for all times and all peoples.[1] The Stoics grounded justice in the divine rational order of the universe and made it a duty of all rational creatures to conform to that order. And modern Humanism – whatever else it is – carries within it, as this article will show, a secularized version of exactly this Platonic-Stoic idealism, substituting Human Dignity and Universal Reason for the divine Logos but retaining the same essential structure: there are objective moral truths that bind all human beings at all times and in all places, regardless of their circumstances or the specific agreements they have made.

Epicurus rejected all of this. Not cautiously, not partially, and not because he had failed to understand what he was rejecting. He rejected it because it is false to the nature of things as the evidence of sensation and experience establishes, and because accepting it produces unnecessary human suffering by grounding ethical life in obligations that cannot be derived from the natural guidance of pleasure and pain and that must therefore be imposed by external authority – divine, rational, or political.

This article traces the Epicurean account of justice through its primary ancient texts, examines each of the major competing traditions in detail, and shows why the Epicurean position is not only philosophically coherent but more honest to the actual workings of human social life than the idealized abstractions it opposes.

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## Part One: What Epicurus Actually Said About Justice

### The Principal Doctrines – The Core Texts

The most authoritative ancient source for the Epicurean theory of justice is the series of Principal Doctrines from 31 through 38, which form a continuous and internally consistent analysis of what justice is, where it comes from, and how it applies. These doctrines were intended to be memorized, and they represent Epi-

curus's most condensed and authoritative statement of his position. They should be read as a group rather than in isolation:

> *"The justice which arises from nature is a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and save them from being harmed."*[2] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 31

> *"For all living things which have not been able to make compacts not to harm one another or be harmed, nothing ever is either just or unjust; and likewise too for all tribes of men which have been unable or unwilling to make compacts not to harm or be harmed."*[3] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 32

> *"Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another in any place whatever and at any time it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed."*[4] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 33

> *"Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which attaches to the apprehension of being unable to escape those appointed to punish such actions."*[5] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 34

> *"It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed, to be confident that he will escape detection, even if at present he escapes a thousand times. For up to the time of death it cannot be certain that he will indeed escape."*[6] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 35

> *"In its general aspect justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another: but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country or any other circumstances the same thing does not turn out to be just for all."*[7] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 36

> *"Among actions which are sanctioned as just by law, that which is proved on examination to be of advantage in the requirements of men's dealings with one another, has the guarantee of justice, whether it is the same for all or not. But if a man makes a law and it does not turn out to lead to advantage in men's dealings with each other, then it no longer has the essential nature of justice."*[8] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 37

> *"Where, provided the circumstances have not been altered, actions which were considered just, have been shown not to accord with the general concept in actual practice, then they are not just. But where, when circumstances have changed, the*

> *same actions which were sanctioned as just no longer lead to advantage, there they were just at the time when they were of advantage for the dealings of fellow-citizens with one another, but subsequently they are no longer just, when no longer of advantage."*[9] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 38

These eight doctrines, taken together, constitute one of the most radical and coherent accounts of justice in all of ancient philosophy. Each requires careful examination.

## What PD 31 Actually Claims

PD 31 establishes the foundational definition: natural justice is a compact for mutual benefit – not to harm others or be harmed by them. This is often called a "social contract" account of justice, and in that description there is genuine insight but also the source of a major and consequential misreading.

The word "natural" is doing important work here. Epicurus is not saying that justice is a human invention that has no grounding outside of convention. He is saying that the kind of justice that actually connects to the natural human experience of pleasure and pain is the kind that arises from mutual agreements about not harming and not being harmed. The motivation for entering into such agreements is natural: people who live without security from harm experience constant fear, which is a significant pain. The agreement to establish mutual security removes that pain and thereby produces a genuine good. Justice, in this sense, is grounded in the same natural guidance – pleasure and pain – that grounds everything else in Epicurean ethics.

What PD 31 excludes is just as important as what it includes. It excludes the Platonic account of justice as participation in an eternal Form. It excludes the Stoic account of justice as conformity to the divine rational order. It excludes the religious account of justice as obedience to divine command. And it excludes the Humanist account of justice as respect for universal human dignity grounded in abstract reason. None of these have any place in the Epicurean account, because none of them can be traced back to the natural experience of any actual creature capable of pleasure and pain.

### PD 32 and 33: Justice Does Not Exist in the Abstract

PD 32 makes an observation that most traditions of moral philosophy have found deeply uncomfortable: creatures that cannot make agreements have no justice and no injustice. The lion that kills the gazelle is not acting unjustly. Two rocks that collide are not in conflict. And peoples who either cannot or will not make agreements with each other stand in no relation of justice or injustice to each other.

This is a direct and deliberate contradiction of the Platonic and Stoic view that justice exists as an abstract property independent of any actual relationship between beings capable of making agreements. For Plato, justice is one of the eternal Forms: it exists whether or not any just beings or just acts exist to participate in it. For the Stoics, the rational order of the cosmos is just whether or not any rational creature acknowledges it. Epicurus says: none of that. Justice is nothing in the abstract. It exists only in actual relationships among actual beings capable of entering and maintaining agreements.

PD 33 makes this explicit: "Justice was never a thing in itself." This is among the most direct rejections of Platonic moral realism in all of ancient philosophy. Plato's argument in the *Republic* is that justice is a thing in itself – that the Form of Justice exists and that just acts and just souls participate in it. Epicurus says flatly: this is not the case. Justice is not a thing in itself. It is a compact, arising in actual transactions among actual people, for the actual purpose of preventing harm.

### PD 36–38: The Contextual and Conditional Character of Justice

PD 36 makes a point that has often been overlooked. There is a sense in which justice is "the same for all peoples" – the underlying principle, that agreements for mutual benefit provide protection from harm, is universal because it is grounded in the universal human experience of pleasure and pain.[10] But the application of that principle to particular circumstances differs for all peoples and all times, because circumstances differ.[11]

This is not moral relativism in the nihilistic sense – the view that no standard of justice exists and that any arrangement is as good as any other. It is the more careful and more honest view that the standard (mutual benefit) is universal but its application is always contextual. What arrangements genuinely provide mutual

benefit depends on the circumstances of the parties involved, and those circumstances vary enormously across times, places, and cultures.

PD 37 presses the point further: a law that has been enacted but turns out not to be mutually advantageous lacks the quality of justice. Legal enactment does not make something just. Conformity with tradition does not make something just. Agreement with an abstract ideal does not make something just. The only thing that makes something just is that it is actually and genuinely advantageous to the people in the relationship it governs.

### PD 38 and the Key Conditional Point

PD 38 is the doctrine that has been most frequently overlooked, most consistently misread by Humanist interpreters, and is in some respects the most important of the entire series.

The doctrine states: where circumstances have changed, and what was previously recognized as just no longer accords with what is advantageous, it was just when it was advantageous – and it is no longer just when it is no longer advantageous.

The practical implication of this is exactly the opposite of what most contractarian theories of justice claim. Most contractarian theories – including the version most commonly associated with Humanism – hold that once a just agreement has been made, it creates an ongoing obligation that persists through subsequent changes in circumstance. You made the agreement; therefore you are bound to keep it. Breaking the agreement is unjust, full stop.

Epicurus says: no. When circumstances change and the agreement is no longer advantageous to a party, it is no longer just. It is not unjust to exit an agreement that has ceased to serve the purposes for which it was made. More than that: pursuing pleasure and happiness when an agreement has ceased to benefit you is the most natural thing in the world, and calling it "unjust" requires appealing to a standard of justice that has nothing to do with the actual advantages and disadvantages of the parties – which is to say, it requires importing exactly the kind of abstract obligation that Epicurus's entire account of justice is designed to eliminate.

This point needs to be stated as plainly as possible, because it is the point most often lost: **when an agreement ceases to be beneficial, it ceases to be just.** It is

therefore not unjust to break it. It is natural. The Epicurean framework does not create permanent binding obligations that override the natural guidance of pleasure and pain in perpetuity. It explains how genuine justice arises from natural human interaction, and it follows that natural interaction through its changes as circumstances change.

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## Part Two: Security, the Natural Standard of Justice, and the Ring of Gyges

### Security as the Positive Good That Justice Creates

The discussion of Epicurean justice in terms of the compact against harm can easily leave the impression that the Epicurean account is purely negative – that what justice provides is the mere removal of a threat. Javier Aoiz and Marcelo Boeri, in their important recent study *Theory and Practice in Epicurean Political Philosophy* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), argue persuasively that this impression is incomplete and that the positive good which justice creates – what the Epicureans called security, the Greek word for which is safety and confidence in one's circumstances – is an essential component of the pleasurable life, not merely the precondition for one.

Security, on Aoiz and Boeri's reconstruction of the Epicurean account, provides three specific goods that a solitary or unprotected life cannot reliably provide. First, it provides physical safety: the person who lives within a community protected by a functioning compact against harm does not spend their days in fear of violence or depredation. Second, it provides the conditions for friendship: the deepest and most durable pleasures available to human beings – the pleasures of genuine friendship, of intellectual community, of shared philosophical life – require the kind of stable social environment that security makes possible. Third, it provides confidence about the future: the ability to anticipate, plan, and look forward with reasonable expectation rather than constant anxiety depends on living in circumstances stable enough that tomorrow will not bring random destruction.

These three goods are not peripheral to the pleasurable life. They are among its most important constituents. The Epicurean who retreats entirely from political engagement in the name of avoiding unnecessary complications has misunderstood his own philosophy: a complete and maximally pleasurable life is not possible in isolation. It requires the social and political conditions that make friendship, safety, and confidence about the future available. Justice – the maintenance of the compact against harm – is therefore not merely an external constraint that the Epicurean tolerates in order to avoid punishment. It is an active contributor to the pleasurable life, providing goods that no other means can adequately supply.

This understanding is directly confirmed by *Principal Doctrine* 14:

> *"The most unalloyed source of protection from men, which is secured to some extent by a certain force of expulsion, is in fact the immunity which results from a quiet life and the retirement from the world."*[12] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 14

And by *Principal Doctrine* 40:

> *"As many as possess the power to procure complete immunity from their neighbours, these also live most pleasantly with one another, since they have the most certain pledge of security, and after they have enjoyed the fullest intimacy, they do not lament the previous departure of a dead friend, as though he were to be pitied."*[13] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 40

Security is not just the absence of threat. It is the active platform on which the richest forms of human happiness are built.

## The Natural Standard of Justice – Why the Compact Is Not Arbitrary

The contextual and conditional character of Epicurean justice – the fact that what is just depends on the circumstances of the parties and changes when those circumstances change – faces an objection that must be addressed directly: if justice is just whatever is currently advantageous, does that not make it entirely arbitrary? Does it not reduce to the position that anything goes as long as it serves someone's interests?

Aoiz and Boeri's reconstruction provides the most helpful modern account of the Epicurean answer. They argue that the Epicureans held a natural standard of justice – a built-in human recognition of what fair dealing looks like – that gives content to the contextual standard without making it absolute or eternal. This natural recognition is grounded in the universal human experience of pleasure and pain: because all human beings are creatures who feel pleasure and pain, and because the threat of unjust harm is a pain that all human beings can recognize from their own experience, there is a natural basis for the compact against harm that is not merely conventional.

This natural basis is what *Principal Doctrine* 36 is pointing to when it says that "in general, justice is the same for all peoples" – the underlying principle that agreements for mutual protection are what justice consists in is recognizable to all people capable of making agreements, precisely because all such people have the natural experience of what it feels like to be threatened, harmed, and protected.[14] The application of this principle varies with circumstances because circumstances vary, but the principle itself is grounded in universal human nature.

The practical consequence of this is important: Epicurean justice is contextual without being arbitrary, and conditional without being opportunistic. The test of whether an arrangement is just is not "does someone find it advantageous?" but "does it genuinely serve the mutual protection of the people in this particular situation?" That test has real content, grounded in the natural human recognition of harm and benefit, and it excludes arrangements that serve only one party's advantage while imposing harm on others.

## The Ring of Gyges – Would You Act Unjustly If You Could Escape Detection?

Plato poses one of the most searching challenges to any account of justice that grounds it in advantage rather than intrinsic value. In *Republic* Book II, the character Glaucon presents the story of the Ring of Gyges: a shepherd who finds a magical ring that makes its wearer invisible. Given complete invisibility and therefore complete immunity from detection, would anyone continue to act justly? Would they not simply take whatever they wanted, harm whomever they wished, and live without restraint?

Glaucon's point is that if justice is only grounded in the advantages of not being punished and the benefits of mutual agreement, then the person who can escape all consequences has no reason to be just. The invisible man does whatever he wants. And if that is what we would all do given immunity, then "justice" is merely a constraint we accept because we cannot avoid it – not a genuine good.

*Principal Doctrines* 34 and 35 provide the Epicurean answer, and it is more robust than a simple deterrence argument. PD 34 identifies injustice as evil through the fear of not escaping detection. The invisible man is not, on the Epicurean account, free from this fear. PD 35 makes the reason explicit: even someone who escapes detection a thousand times cannot be certain they will escape the thousand-and-first. Until death, the uncertainty remains. The invisible man who acts unjustly does not gain freedom from anxiety – he gains a new and permanent source of it. Every subsequent interaction with the people he has wronged, every moment in which his secret might become known, carries the residual anxiety of someone who knows what he has done and cannot be certain it will never come to light.

But Aoiz and Boeri press the Epicurean response further, and their extension is philosophically important. They argue that the Epicurean sage would not act unjustly even with complete and certain immunity, because the habits of mind and character that unjust action cultivates are themselves incompatible with the pleasurable life. The person who steals, deceives, and harms others when no one is watching is not building the kind of character from which genuine happiness can be sustained. They are training themselves in the dispositions – suspicion of others, contempt for the relationships that generate genuine pleasure, the absence of genuine friendship – that make the richest human goods unavailable. The Ring of Gyges does not liberate the unjust person. It merely removes the external deterrent while leaving intact the internal damage that injustice does to the person who practices it.

This is the deepest Epicurean answer to the challenge of the Ring of Gyges: justice is not merely a constraint that the powerful could advantageously discard if they could escape its consequences. It is a constituent of the kind of character from which a genuinely pleasurable life can be lived. The visible man and the invisible man are the same person. The justice or injustice of the invisible man's

secret actions shapes the character of the person who then goes on to live their visible life. And a life built on a character formed by secret injustice is not the pleasurable life – it is its subtle undermining.

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## Part Three: Torquatus on Justice – On Ends Book One

Torquatus, Cicero's Epicurean spokesman in *On Ends*, develops the account of justice in ways that clarify and extend what the Principal Doctrines establish. His treatment is important because it shows how the Epicurean theory of justice relates to the broader ethical framework of pleasure as the goal of life.

The fundamental point Torquatus makes is that justice is not valued for its own sake but because it is a reliable instrument of happiness. This is not a concession to selfishness – it is the recognition that justice, properly understood, is what makes genuine happiness possible for people who must live together. As he states in *On Ends* Book I:

> *"It is impossible to live pleasurably without living prudently and honourably and justly, and it is impossible to live prudently and honourably and justly without living pleasurably."*[15] – Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 5 (cited by Torquatus)

The relationship between justice and pleasure is not contingent but necessary. The person who acts unjustly lives under the constant fear of being found out – fear that is itself a significant pain, and one that cannot be fully allayed regardless of how carefully the injustice was concealed (this is the point of PD 35). The person who acts justly lives without that fear. Justice, understood as the maintenance of agreements that genuinely serve mutual benefit, is therefore directly in the interest of everyone who wants a genuinely pleasurable life, not just in the interest of society in the abstract.

Torquatus also makes clear that the Epicurean account does not diminish the importance of justice by grounding it in pleasure. On the contrary, it gives justice a more honest and more durable foundation than abstract idealism can provide. Abstract obligations – duties imposed by divine command, by universal reason, or by the requirements of participation in an eternal Form – are obligations that

can be disputed, reinterpreted, and ultimately evaded by anyone who questions the authority behind them. The obligation to maintain agreements that genuinely benefit you and those you care about is an obligation that flows from the deepest level of natural motivation and cannot be evaded without denying what you actually are.

In Book II, when Cicero challenges whether Epicureans can have genuine virtue including justice, Torquatus's implied response is that the challenge rests on a confusion: Cicero assumes that unless justice is valued for its own sake – as an end independent of its consequences – it is not genuine. But this assumption is itself the error. Justice that is valued because it genuinely produces good outcomes for everyone involved is more firmly grounded, not less, than justice that must be maintained regardless of whether it produces good outcomes.

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## Part Four: Lucretius on the Natural Origin of Justice

Lucretius, in Book V of *De Rerum Natura*, provides the fullest Epicurean account of how justice and law arose from natural human social development – and his account confirms and extends the Epicurean Principal Doctrines by giving them a historical and evolutionary dimension that makes the contrast with abstract idealism even sharper.

Lucretius describes the development of human social life from its earliest stages: isolated individuals and families gradually finding it advantageous to combine into communities, to make agreements, to develop language, to establish customs and laws. None of this was imposed from outside. None of it derived from a pre-existing divine order that human beings were simply recognizing and conforming to. It arose naturally, from the interaction of people who discovered through experience that certain arrangements produced better outcomes for everyone than the alternatives.

> *"Then, too, neighbours began eagerly to form friendship one with another, not to hurt or be harmed, and they commended to mercy children and the race of women, when with cries and gestures they taught by broken words that 'tis right for all men to have pity on the weak. Yet not in all ways could unity be begotten, but a good part, the larger part, would keep their compacts loyally; or else the hu-*

> *man race would even then have been all destroyed, nor could breeding have prolonged the generations until now."*[16] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V.1019–1027

This passage is philosophically dense. Lucretius is describing the natural emergence of the compact against harm that PD 31 identifies as the foundation of justice. People who discovered the advantage of not harming and not being harmed formed communities on that basis. Communities that failed to maintain this compact sufficiently were destroyed. Communities that maintained it survived and transmitted their arrangements to subsequent generations.

The natural selection of communities that maintained beneficial agreements is not the imposition of a divine order. It is the natural outcome of people discovering through experience what works. And it confirms exactly the conditional character of Epicurean justice: the arrangements were maintained because they continued to be beneficial. Where they ceased to be beneficial, they were changed.

Lucretius continues with the development of kings and laws:

> *"And so the kings were put to death and the ancient majesty of thrones and proud sceptres was overthrown and lay in ruins, and the glorious emblem on the head of kings was stained with blood, and beneath the feet of the mob mourned the loss of its high honour; for once dreaded overmuch, eagerly now it is trampled. And so things would pass to the utmost dregs of disorder, when every man sought for himself the power and the headship. Then some of them taught men to appoint magistrates and establish laws that they might consent to obey ordinances."*[17] – Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V.1136–1144

The account here is consistent with PD 38: when arrangements ceased to be advantageous – when kings became tyrants and their authority became a source of harm rather than benefit – they were overthrown. This was not unjust on the Epicurean account. It was the natural consequence of circumstances changing in such a way that the existing arrangement no longer served its purpose.

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## Part Five: What Plato Said and Why Epicurus Rejected It

### The Form of Justice

Plato's account of justice in the *Republic* is the most fully developed and most influential ancient statement of the position that Epicurus systematically opposed. For Plato, justice is one of the highest of the eternal Forms – a perfect, unchanging, universal ideal that measures all actual just acts and just constitutions against itself. The philosopher who has genuinely understood justice has ascended from the cave of ordinary experience to the sunlit world of the Forms and seen justice as it truly is, not as the shifting and imperfect approximation it appears to be in the world of change and sensation.

The practical implications of this view for politics and ethics are immediate. If justice is an eternal Form, then the question "is this arrangement just?" is not answered by asking whether it is mutually beneficial to the parties involved. It is answered by asking whether it conforms to the eternal standard. Any arrangement that does not conform to the standard is unjust, regardless of how mutually beneficial it may be to those involved. Any arrangement that does conform to the standard is just, regardless of whether the people involved find it pleasant or unpleasant, advantageous or disadvantageous.

This is the account that Epicurus's entire theory of justice is designed to refute. The Form of Justice is exactly the kind of "thing in itself" that PD 33 denies: justice "was never a thing in itself." The Form of Justice is also exactly the kind of abstract standard that, by being abstracted from the actual circumstances of actual people, makes itself available as an instrument of authority – a standard that can always be invoked to override the natural guidance of pleasure and pain in the name of conforming to a higher ideal.

### Plato's Protagoras and the Origin of Justice

Plato's *Protagoras* presents a myth about the origin of justice that is directly opposed to the Epicurean natural-development account in Lucretius. In the Protagoras myth, Zeus sent Hermes to distribute justice and reverence among human beings, giving these qualities equally to all, so that they could form communities

and live together. Justice, in this account, is a divine gift, distributed by the gods as a precondition for human social life.

This myth is not, in Plato's treatment, merely a story. It reflects a philosophical position: the capacities for justice and reverence that make human society possible are not products of natural development and mutual advantage. They are gifts of a divine order that stands above and behind human social life. Human beings who exercise these capacities are conforming to a divine design, not merely discovering what arrangements work best for creatures like themselves.

Lucretius's account in Book V is a direct materialist refutation of this mythological framework. The development of human social life, including the development of justice and law, is explained entirely by natural causes: people discovered through experience what arrangements were advantageous, maintained those arrangements as long as they continued to be advantageous, and modified or overthrew them when they ceased to be so. No divine gift was required. No eternal Form was being participated in. Natural creatures with natural desires for pleasure and aversion to pain found natural ways of living together that reduced pain and increased pleasure. That is the whole story.

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## Part Six: Cicero's Natural Law Against Epicurean Justice

### The Most Direct Ancient Statement of the Opposition

The most direct ancient statement of the anti-Epicurean position on justice is found in Cicero's *Republic*, where the character Laelius states what has become the foundational text of the natural law tradition in Western philosophy:

> *"True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions... It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely. We cannot be freed from its obligations by senate or people, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it. And there will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now*

> *and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times."*[18] – Cicero, *Republic* Book III (Laelius speaking)

This passage is a perfect specimen of everything Epicurus opposed. "One eternal and unchangeable law valid for all nations and all times" – this is the exact opposite of PD 36's contextual account of justice.[19] "Right reason in agreement with nature" – but Cicero's "nature" is not the nature of actual creatures guided by pleasure and pain; it is the Stoic divine rational order, the Logos embedded in the cosmos. "It is a sin to try to alter this law" – but PD 38 says explicitly that when circumstances change, what was just is no longer just, and it is entirely appropriate for the arrangement to change with the circumstances.

Laelius's law is eternal, unchangeable, universal, and independent of what any senate or people may decide. It summons to duty by its commands. Epicurean justice is contextual, mutable, particular, and entirely dependent on what is actually advantageous to the actual parties in their actual circumstances. It summons to nothing except the natural guidance of pleasure and pain.

These two accounts are not variations on a theme. They are mutually exclusive. Cicero, who knew Epicurean philosophy thoroughly, was not confused about what he was doing. He was presenting the natural law tradition as the alternative to Epicurean justice, and he was doing so in terms that his Roman reading audience would find compelling.

### Cicero and the Stoic Foundation

The natural law tradition in Cicero's *Republic* is directly derived from Stoic philosophy, and its foundation is the Stoic doctrine of divine providence. For the Stoics, the universe is pervaded throughout by the divine rational principle – the active fire or reason that structures all things according to a rational plan. Justice, for the Stoics, is not a compact among human beings for mutual advantage. It is the requirement of reason that all rational beings conform to the rational order of the cosmos.

This means that justice makes demands that are entirely independent of pleasure, pain, advantage, or disadvantage. The Stoic who performs a just act because it is just – regardless of whether it advantages him, regardless of whether it is painful, regardless of whether anyone will ever know about it – is conforming to

the divine rational order. The Stoic who performs an unjust act, even a secret one that he will never be punished for, has violated the order of the cosmos.

Epicurus's response to this is delivered through PD 34 and 35. PD 34 states that injustice is not evil in itself – it is evil through the fear of not escaping punishment. This is often misread as a cynical claim that the only reason not to be unjust is fear of getting caught. But the claim is more subtle and more honest than that. It is the recognition that the actual harm of injustice to the person who commits it – the harm that gives the prohibition of injustice its genuine force – is not participation in the violation of an eternal cosmic order. It is the lived anxiety of someone who knows they have acted against their agreements and cannot be certain they will not be detected. That anxiety is a real pain, a constant source of unhappiness, and a genuine threat to the pleasurable life.

PD 35 presses the point further: the person who acts unjustly in secret cannot feel genuinely confident they will escape detection. Until death, the uncertainty remains. This means that the unjust life is, for the Epicurean, not a life of secret freedom from obligation but a life of permanent low-grade anxiety – exactly the kind of irrational fear that Epicurean philosophy is designed to eliminate.

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## Part Seven: Nietzsche Against the Stoics and Their Heirs

Nietzsche's critique of Stoicism, and of the broader tradition of "true world" philosophy it represents, is one of the most powerful available as a modern philosophical complement to the Epicurean account. Nietzsche admired Epicurus and identified him as among the few ancient philosophers who had genuinely escaped the life-denial of the Platonic-Stoic tradition. His attacks on Stoicism are attacks on exactly the structure that the Epicurean Principal Doctrines on justice are designed to dismantle.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes with particular sharpness about the Stoic claim to "live according to nature":[20]

> *"You desire to LIVE 'according to Nature'? Oh, you noble Stoics, what fraud of words! Imagine to yourselves a being like Nature, boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice,*

> *at once fruitful and barren and uncertain: imagine to yourselves INDIFFERENCE as a power – how COULD you live in accordance with such indifference? To live – is not that just endeavouring to be otherwise than this Nature? Is not living valuing, preferring, being unjust, being limited, endeavouring to be different?... In reality, however, it is quite otherwise with you: while you pretend to read with rapture the canon of your law in Nature, you want something quite the contrary, you strange actors and self-deluders!"*[21] – Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 9[22]

The Stoic claim to "live according to nature" is, in Nietzsche's analysis, a projection.[23] The Stoics have taken their own moral commitments – their valuation of reason, duty, and the suppression of passion – and inscribed them onto nature, calling the result "natural law." But actual nature, as Epicurean physics honestly describes it, is atoms moving through void without purpose, without justice, and without care for human moral categories. The "natural law" that Cicero declares to be eternal and unchangeable is not nature at all. It is a Stoic fantasy given cosmic authority by philosophical sleight of hand.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche identifies the Stoic moral framework as a continuation of Plato's error – the positing of a "true world" of eternal moral obligations against which the natural world of actual experience is perpetually found deficient. His history of that error begins with Plato:

> *"The true world—attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it, he is it. (The oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, and persuasive. A circumlocution for the sentence, 'I, Plato, am the truth.')"*[24] – Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable"

For Nietzsche, this reversal – the elevation of the abstract and eternal over the natural and actual – is the defining error of Western moral philosophy, and Stoicism is its most philosophically rigorous ancient expression. Epicurus, by contrast, took the natural world seriously and built his ethics on its actual features – pleasure and pain as natural guides – rather than on an imagined cosmic order imposed on nature from outside.

In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche names Epicurus as the ancient enemy of the same error in its religious form:

> *"One should read Lucretius to comprehend what Epicurus fought: not paganism but 'Christianity,' by which I mean the corruption of souls by the concepts of guilt, punishment, and immortality. ... And Epicurus would have won; every respectable spirit in the Roman Empire was an Epicurean."*[25] – Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* §58

And when Nietzsche lists the dead with whom he "must come to terms," Epicurus comes first:

> *"Four pairs did not deny themselves to me as I sacrificed: Epicurus and Montaigne, Goethe and Spinoza, Plato and Rousseau, Pascal and Schopenhauer."*[26] – Nietzsche, *Mixed Opinions and Maxims* §408

Nietzsche's admiration for Epicurus was not uncritical – he found Epicurus too concerned with peace and retirement. But he consistently identified Epicurus as the ancient philosopher who had most honestly confronted the challenge of building an ethics on actual natural experience rather than on the "true world" fantasies of the Platonic-Stoic tradition.

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## Part Eight: Humanism – Secular Platonism Under a New Name

### What "Humanism" Actually Is

The first thing to be said about Humanism, as it applies to the present discussion, is that it is not a unified system with a single authoritative statement of its commitments. "Humanism" is a term that has been applied to a wide range of intellectual movements across several centuries, and there is no council, text, or philosopher whose account of Humanism can be appealed to as definitive in the way that Plato's *Republic* is authoritative for Platonism or the Stoic fragments are authoritative for the early Stoa. Modern Humanist organizations issue manifestos, but these documents represent the consensus of their particular membership at a particular time, not the statement of a settled philosophical tradition.

This matters for the present discussion because when Epicurus is contrasted with "Humanist" assumptions, it is important to be clear about what those assumptions actually are – and to recognize that what most people associate with Humanism, when they invoke it as a philosophical framework, is not a coherent

and independently developed set of ideas but an amalgam drawing primarily from Platonism and Stoicism in their secularized modern forms.

The core commitments that most people identify as Humanist are: the dignity of every human being as a bearer of intrinsic worth; the existence of universal moral obligations grounded in that dignity; the accessibility of moral truth through reason rather than revelation; and the ideal of human progress toward a more just and rational social order. These are not Epicurean ideas. They are Platonic and Stoic ideas with the explicitly theological framework removed.

**"Good Without God" – Secular Platonism**

The most common Humanist slogan in contemporary discourse is "good without God" – the claim that morality does not require divine grounding and that human beings can lead fully ethical lives without religious belief. This is presented as an emancipatory position, a liberation of ethics from theology, a step toward a more rational and honest moral framework.

From the Epicurean perspective, this slogan is less liberated than it appears. The "good" that the Humanist wants to be "without God" is, in almost every case, not Epicurean good – not the natural experience of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. It is Platonic good: the abstract ideal of human dignity, universal moral worth, and rational obligation that Plato developed in terms of the Forms and that the Stoics developed in terms of divine rational order. The Humanist has removed the theological foundation – the God who created human beings in the divine image, the Logos that pervades the cosmos – but retained the structure: there are abstract moral truths that bind all human beings at all times, grounded in something (Human Dignity, Universal Reason) that transcends the natural guidance of pleasure and pain.

"Good without God" is, philosophically, "the Form of the Good without Plato's metaphysics" or "the Stoic natural law without Zeus." The removal of the explicitly divine element does not change the fundamental structure. It is still a "true world" account – still the claim that there are moral obligations that transcend the natural experience of actual people in their actual circumstances, still the claim that these obligations bind even when following them conflicts with the natural guidance of pleasure and pain, still the claim that a person who departs

from these obligations has done something universally and objectively wrong regardless of whether anyone is harmed and regardless of the circumstances.

Epicurus's challenge to this structure is not atheism in the modern sense – Epicurus believed in gods, properly understood. His challenge is philosophical: where do these abstract universal obligations come from, if not from divine command or divine design? What is the "Human Dignity" that grounds universal moral obligations? It is not the dignity that actual human beings experience in their natural lives – a dignity built up from particular relationships, particular communities, particular histories. It is an abstract property attributed to all human beings by definition, in virtue of which they are supposed to bear obligations to all other humans at all times.

This is exactly the Platonic move: attribute to human beings, in virtue of their participation in an abstract category (Humanity, Reason, Dignity), a set of obligations that override the natural guidance of their actual experience. The Epicurean response to this move is the same whether it comes from Plato, the Stoics, the Abrahamic religions, or secular Humanism: the obligations must be traceable back to the natural experience of pleasure and pain, or they are not genuine obligations – they are impositions of an imaginary authority that, however well-intentioned, produces unnecessary suffering by requiring human beings to act against their natural guidance in the name of an abstraction.

**The Humanist Misreading of Epicurean Justice**

The Humanist misreading of Epicurean justice follows a predictable pattern that becomes visible once the underlying Platonic structure is identified. Humanists who encounter Epicurus's account of justice as a compact for mutual benefit naturally read it as a version of social contract theory – and social contract theory, in the tradition of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, is a tradition that grounds universal moral obligations in agreements that, once made, create permanent binding duties.

On this reading, Epicurus is saying something like this: all rational beings have agreed (or would agree under appropriate conditions) not to harm each other. This agreement constitutes the foundation of justice. The obligation not to

harm, once established by this agreement, is a permanent moral obligation that continues regardless of subsequent changes in circumstances.

But this is exactly backwards from what Epicurus actually says. PD 38 states explicitly: when circumstances change such that the agreement is no longer advantageous, it is no longer just. The obligation is not permanent. It is conditional on the continuing advantage of the parties.

The Humanist reads the Epicurean compact as creating a permanent obligation analogous to a legal contract under modern law – an agreement that binds the parties regardless of subsequent changes in their situations except under very specific conditions for rescission. Epicurus's compact is nothing of the kind. It is an arrangement that exists because and to the extent that it serves the natural interests of the parties. When it ceases to serve those interests, it ceases to be just – not merely inconvenient, not merely costly, but no longer just.

This is not moral nihilism. It does not say that people should constantly calculate whether their existing agreements still benefit them and break them whenever they find a short-term advantage in doing so. The Epicurean account of why the unjust life is unhappy (PD 34–35) explains why consistent maintenance of beneficial agreements is itself in the long-term interest of everyone who wants a pleasurable life.[27] But the reason for maintaining agreements is not the abstract obligation created by the agreement. It is the genuine ongoing advantage that the agreement provides – and when that advantage is genuinely gone, the agreement is genuinely no longer binding.

This has real implications for political philosophy that the Humanist tradition has always found uncomfortable. It means that the legitimacy of political arrangements is not grounded in their conformity to an abstract ideal of justice or universal human dignity. It is grounded in whether they actually serve the interests of the people living under them. When they cease to do so, they are no longer just – which means that pursuing better arrangements is not rebellion against justice but the most natural expression of it.

### Universal Benevolence and the Children of God

The specific Humanist commitment to universal benevolence – the duty of every person to extend goodwill and moral concern to all other human beings

equally and without distinction – is the clearest example of the Platonic-Stoic inheritance operating in secular dress.

The Stoic foundation of this commitment was explicit: we are all children of Zeus, fragments of the divine Logos, citizens of the cosmic city. Our duty of benevolence to each other derives from this common divine origin and this common rational nature. Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic emperor, returns to this theme repeatedly: look on all people as fellow rational creatures, all participating in the same divine reason, all deserving the same moral concern regardless of their relation to you personally.

This is not an Epicurean position. Epicurus valued friendship – *particular* friendship, with *particular* people who share your values and your way of life – as the greatest pleasure available to human beings. He did not hold that we have universal obligations to all other human beings simply in virtue of their being human. The relationships that generate genuine obligations are actual relationships among actual people who have made actual agreements with each other. Strangers on the other side of the world, with whom you have no actual relationship and no actual agreement, generate no obligation of the same kind – though prudence, kindness, and the recognition that your circle of friends and agreements may expand into any direction at any time will naturally generate a disposition toward general goodwill that is not itself a duty but a natural expression of a person who understands how genuine goods are created and maintained.

The Humanist, inheriting the Stoic framework in secular form, transforms this universal benevolence into a moral obligation: we have a duty to extend concern to all human beings equally because they all possess the abstract property of human dignity. The Epicurean asks: where does this duty come from? If not from the natural guidance of pleasure and pain, and if not from divine command, and if not from the requirements of an eternal Form, then it comes from nowhere – it is an obligation constructed from the Stoic framework with the theology removed, floating free of any foundation that could justify it.

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## Part Nine: Epicurus Against the Libertarians – Why Natural Self-Interest Is Not a Categorical Imperative

Of all the modern traditions that might be expected to find natural allies in Epicurean philosophy, Libertarianism makes the most plausible initial case. Where Humanism grounds justice in universal human dignity and Stoicism grounds it in divine rational order, Libertarianism starts from something that sounds unmistakably Epicurean: the individual pursuit of self-interest, the rejection of obligations imposed by external authority, and the grounding of social arrangements in voluntary agreement rather than divine command or abstract moral law. Epicurus was suspicious of the state. He valued personal pleasure above civic duty. He held that agreements derive their force from the benefit they provide, not from the authority of those who impose them. Surely, the Libertarian might say, Epicurus was one of us?

The surface resemblance is real but the philosophical foundations are entirely different – and the differences are the more important for being subtle. Libertarianism, particularly in its most philosophically developed forms, reproduces the same essential error that runs through every tradition Epicurus opposed: it elevates a principle abstracted from natural human experience into a categorical rule that overrides the natural guidance of pleasure and pain. It just does so from a starting point – individual self-interest – that sounds less obviously theological or idealist than the starting points of its rivals. Getting the distinction right matters precisely because the resemblance is genuine enough to mislead.

### The Non-Aggression Principle as Abstract Rule vs. Epicurean Contextual Agreement

The Non-Aggression Principle, as stated by Murray Rothbard and later made foundational to libertarian political philosophy, holds that it is always and everywhere impermissible to initiate force or coercion against another person or their legitimately acquired property. The principle is presented as categorical: it admits no exceptions for circumstances, consequences, or the specific needs of particular communities. It is, Rothbard argued, the fundamental axiom of a just so-

cial order, derivable from the nature of human beings as rational agents possessing self-ownership.

This categorical structure is exactly what Epicurus's Principal Doctrines 31 through 38 dismantle. For Epicurus, the compact against harm – do not harm others, do not be harmed – is not a categorical axiom derivable from the nature of rational agency. It is a practical arrangement that arises from natural human interaction when people discover that mutual protection serves their interests better than constant conflict. Its authority derives entirely from the benefit it provides. And – this is the key point that the Non-Aggression Principle's categorical form conceals – when the arrangement ceases to provide that benefit, it ceases to be just.

PD 38 states this with complete clarity: where circumstances have changed and what was recognized as just is no longer advantageous, it is no longer just. The Libertarian who derives the Non-Aggression Principle from the axiom of self-ownership and treats it as eternally binding regardless of circumstances has done exactly what PD 33 says justice never is: they have made it "a thing in itself," an abstract principle that stands above and governs all actual situations rather than arising from and remaining answerable to the actual situations of actual people.

Consider the practical implication. Rothbard's formulation of the NAP holds that it is always impermissible to initiate force – that this prohibition is categorical and admits no exceptions based on beneficial consequences. The Epicurean account does not recognize this kind of categorical prohibition. What the Epicurean recognizes is that agreements against harm are beneficial to the parties, that maintaining them generally serves the interests of everyone involved, and that the Epicurean who understands this will naturally maintain such agreements as a matter of genuine self-interest wisely understood. But "naturally maintained because genuinely beneficial" is a completely different thing from "categorically prohibited regardless of circumstances." The Epicurean account preserves the flexibility that actual human situations require. The NAP sacrifices that flexibility on the altar of a principle derived from an abstraction – self-ownership – that has no more basis in Epicurean natural philosophy than the Stoic Logos or the Platonic Form of Justice.

**Rand's "Virtue of Selfishness" – Sounds Like Epicurus, Is Actually Kant**

Ayn Rand's moral philosophy, set out most systematically in *The Virtue of Selfishness* and the ethical sections of *Atlas Shrugged*, is the modern account of self-interest as a moral principle that comes closest to sounding like Epicurus. Rand held that the pursuit of one's own rational self-interest is the highest moral good, that sacrifice of one's genuine interests to others is a moral wrong, and that a proper ethics begins from the recognition that individual life and happiness are the standard of value. Against the Kantian ethics of duty and the Christian ethics of self-sacrifice, Rand argued for an ethics grounded in what she called the objective requirements of human life.

This sounds very like Epicurus's insistence that pleasure – the natural guidance of each living creature toward its own good – is the foundation of ethics, that sacrifice of genuine pleasure in the name of abstract obligation is not virtue but its destruction, and that the proper basis of human association is the genuine benefit it provides to those involved rather than the performance of duties owed to an abstract humanity.

But the resemblance breaks down at the most important point, and the breakdown reveals something philosophically significant. Rand did not simply describe self-interest as what human beings naturally pursue. She converted it into a categorical imperative: rational self-interest is what you *ought* to pursue, as a matter of rational duty, because it is objectively required by your nature as a rational being. The language of "objective," "rational," and "required" is Kantian, not Epicurean, even though Rand spent her career attacking Kant.

The difference matters. Epicurus does not say that you have a duty to pursue pleasure because reason requires it. He says that pleasure is what Nature has provided as the actual guide of all living creatures – what all living things in fact move toward and away from pain in fact avoid. It is a natural fact, not a rational obligation. When Epicurus says to pursue pleasure, he is not imposing a categorical imperative. He is describing what the natural guidance of your own nature will lead you toward if you understand it correctly and do not distort it with irrational fears and vain desires. The difference is between a philosopher who says "here is how your own nature actually works, understand it and live accord-

ingly" and one who says "here is the objective rational principle you are obligated to follow." The first is Epicurus. The second is Kant in Randian dress.

This matters for the theory of justice because Rand's derivation of property rights, individual rights, and the principles of a just social order follows the Kantian pattern: she derives them from rational axioms about the nature of persons as rational agents, treats them as categorical and universal, and holds that a just society is one that conforms to these rationally derived principles regardless of the specific circumstances and needs of its members. PD 36–38 is a direct refutation of this methodology: justice is not derived from rational axioms about personhood. It is what actually prevents harm and provides benefit in the specific circumstances of specific communities, and it varies with those circumstances because the circumstances vary.

Rand's own account of justice, moreover, suffers from the same deficiency she correctly identified in altruistic ethics: it imposes on people an abstract standard derived from philosophical argument rather than allowing the natural guidance of pleasure and pain to do its work. Epicurus's account requires no such imposition. It grounds the case for maintaining agreements not in a rationally derived principle of self-ownership or individual rights, but in the straightforward observation that people who maintain genuine and mutually beneficial agreements live better – more pleasurably, with more security, with more opportunity for the deep friendships that are the greatest human goods – than people who do not.

### Voluntarism and the Permanent Obligation Error

Both Rothbardian libertarianism and Randian ethics share what we might call the permanent obligation error – the assumption that a genuinely voluntary agreement creates a binding obligation that persists through subsequent changes in circumstances. This is the same error that appears in Humanist social contract theory (analyzed in Part Eight), and it fails against PD 38 for exactly the same reasons.

The libertarian version of this error is particularly instructive because libertarians are usually alert to the ways in which obligations can be manufactured by invoking consent that was not genuinely free. Rothbard argued extensively that many

obligations claimed by states and institutions are not genuinely binding because the "consent" behind them was never real. This is a legitimate concern, and the Epicurean framework accommodates it naturally: the compact against harm is genuine justice only when it is an actual and mutually beneficial arrangement among people who genuinely benefit from it.

But having correctly identified that false consent creates no genuine obligation, libertarians then make the mirror error: they hold that genuine consent creates permanent and indefeasible obligations that persist regardless of subsequent changes. Rothbard's property theory, for example, holds that legitimately acquired property creates an absolute and permanent right that cannot be overridden by changing circumstances, the needs of others, or the consequences of maintaining or violating it.

Epicurus would recognize this as the same error in a different form. The compact against harm is binding because and to the extent that it serves the mutual benefit of the parties. When it ceases to do so – when circumstances change in ways that make the existing arrangement harmful rather than beneficial to one or more parties – PD 38 says plainly that the arrangement is no longer just. Not inconvenient. Not regrettable. No longer just. The categorical permanence that libertarian property theory and contract theory attribute to legitimately created obligations is exactly the kind of abstract, circumstance-independent standard that Epicurean justice is designed to replace with something more honest to actual human experience.

### Kant: The Philosophical Source of the Error in All Its Forms

The philosophical structure that underlies the Libertarian errors – the Non-Aggression Principle as categorical rule, Rand's rational self-interest as objective imperative, voluntarism as permanently binding – is recognizably Kantian, and naming this connection explicitly is useful because it shows that the opposition between Epicurus and Libertarianism is not merely about political conclusions. It is about the deepest level of moral philosophy.

Kant held that genuine moral obligations must be categorical – binding regardless of consequences, desires, or circumstances – because anything else is merely hypothetical: "if you want X, do Y" rather than "do Y, full stop." An ethics

grounded in desire, consequence, or pleasure, Kant argued, cannot produce genuine moral obligations because it is always relative to what someone happens to want. The moral law must be absolute, universal, and derived from pure practical reason alone, entirely independent of the natural inclinations and desires of the person it binds.

This is the precise opposite of the Epicurean account at every point. For Epicurus, moral guidance is grounded in the natural experience of pleasure and pain – which is the most reliable possible grounding because it cannot be argued away, has no need of external authority to give it force, and is available to every living creature simply in virtue of being alive. For Kant, this grounding is exactly what makes an ethics non-genuine: because it depends on natural inclination, it can only produce hypothetical imperatives ("pursue pleasure if you want to be happy") rather than categorical ones ("act on this principle because reason requires it regardless of your inclinations").

Rand accepted this Kantian framework while inverting its content: she argued that rational self-interest rather than selfless duty is the correct categorical imperative, but the categorical structure – the requirement that the principle bind regardless of circumstances, desires, or consequences – is pure Kant. Rothbard similarly derived his libertarian principles from rational axioms in a way that treats them as binding regardless of their actual consequences for actual people.

Nietzsche, whose critique of Kant runs throughout *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Twilight of the Idols*, identified this structure as the philosophical expression of life-denial: the insistence that real moral authority must come from outside and above natural desire, that what actually moves human beings is morally suspect precisely because it is natural, and that genuine morality requires the suppression of natural guidance in favor of a rationally derived principle. Whether that principle is Kantian duty, Randian rational self-interest, or Rothbardian self-ownership makes less difference than it might appear: all three require you to govern your actual natural experience by an abstract rule that claims authority independent of that experience.

Epicurus's answer to all three is the same answer he gave to the Platonists and the Stoics who preceded them by two thousand years: the natural guidance of pleasure and pain is not a deficiency to be corrected by rational principle. It is the

most honest and the most reliable guide available to any living creature, and an ethics that overrides it in the name of a categorical rule has not achieved a higher morality. It has manufactured an artificial obligation and imposed it on the natural life it was supposed to govern.



## Part Ten: Putting It Together – The Epicurean Account in Summary

### Justice as a Living Thing

The Epicurean account of justice, taken as a whole, presents justice as a living thing – something that exists in actual relationships among actual people, that grows and changes with those relationships, and that ceases to exist when the relationships it governed have fundamentally changed.

This is very different from treating justice as a fixed standard against which actual arrangements are perpetually measured and perpetually found deficient. It is also very different from treating justice as a permanent obligation created once for all by an agreement that cannot be revisited. It is the view that justice is what actually works to prevent harm and promote mutual benefit among people living in specific circumstances – and that what works changes with the circumstances.

The practical test of justice, on this account, is not "does this conform to the eternal Form of Justice?" or "does this accord with the requirements of divine natural law?" or "does this respect the abstract dignity of all rational beings equally?" The practical test is: does this arrangement actually prevent harm and provide genuine benefit to the people living under it? If yes, it is just. If no, it is not – and changing it is not unjust but necessary.

### Why This Matters for Us

The Epicurean account of justice matters for us because the alternatives – Platonic, Stoic, Humanist, and Libertarian – all share the same fundamental deficiency: they ground justice in something that cannot be traced back to the natural experience of actual people, and they therefore make justice available as a tool

of authority that can override the natural guidance of pleasure and pain in the name of conforming to an abstract standard. Whether that standard is called the Form of Justice, Natural Law, Human Dignity, the Non-Aggression Principle, or Rational Self-Ownership, the structure is the same: an abstract principle derived from philosophical argument is placed above the actual experience of actual people and used to govern that experience from outside.

Abstract standards of justice have been used throughout history to justify arrangements that cause enormous human suffering while declaring that suffering to be required by justice, dignity, reason, or divine order. The person who objects to their suffering on the grounds that the arrangement that causes it is not actually beneficial to them is told: but justice requires it. The eternal law requires it. Human dignity requires it. The abstract standard is invoked against the natural experience of actual people to override their natural guidance.

Epicurus's account eliminates this tool. If an arrangement causes genuine harm to the people living under it and provides no genuine compensating benefit, it is not just – no matter what eternal standard it may conform to, no matter what divine order it may express, no matter what abstract principle it may satisfy. The natural feelings of pleasure and pain that every living person actually experiences are the only honest measure of whether an arrangement is genuinely good or genuinely harmful. Any framework that calls an arrangement just while the people living under it suffer from it has simply renamed their suffering – and dressed that renaming in the language of duty, dignity, divine will, or rational law to make the renaming harder to challenge. Epicurus's account removes the disguise. What harms the people it governs is not just. What benefits them is. There is no higher court.

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## Key Texts Referenced

- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 31–38 (Bailey translation); the core texts on the Epicurean theory of justice
- Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 5 (on the necessary connection between justice and the pleasurable life)

- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Bailey translation, via Diogenes Laertius)
- Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* (*De Finibus*) Books I and II; especially Book I on justice as an instrument of happiness, and Book II on the challenge that Epicureans cannot have genuine virtue
- Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book V, lines 925–1160 (Bailey translation): the natural development of human social life, communities, agreements, and law; the proto-evolutionary account of how just arrangements survived and unjust ones were overthrown
- Cicero, *Republic* Book III (Keyes translation): the Laelius speech on natural law as eternal, unchangeable, and universal – the primary ancient text of the position Epicurus's PD 36–38 directly contradicts
- Plato, *Republic* Books I and IV (on justice as an eternal Form); *Protagoras* 320c–322d (the Prometheus/Hermes myth of the divine origin of justice)
- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 9 (on Stoic "living according to nature" as self-deception)[28]
- Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" (the history of the "true world" error, beginning with Plato); *The Antichrist* §58; *Mixed Opinions and Maxims* §408
- Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, sections 30 and 58 (on Epicurus as the honest alternative to Platonic-Stoic life-denial)
- Javier Aoiz and Marcelo D. Boeri, *Theory and Practice in Epicurean Political Philosophy: Security, Justice and Tranquility* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023): the most comprehensive modern scholarly treatment of Epicurean political philosophy; especially Chapters 1–3 on the genealogy of justice, security as a component of the pleasurable life, and the natural standard of justice; and Chapter 5 on the Epicurean sage and the Ring of Gyges challenge
- Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (Signet, 1964): the primary text of Randian ethics; the "virtue of selfishness" as rational self-interest; the derivation of a categorical moral imperative from the nature of rational beings – the structure this article identifies as Kantian despite Rand's anti-Kantian rhetoric
- Murray Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (Humanities Press, 1982): the primary text of Rothbardian libertarian political philosophy; the Non-Ag-

gression Principle as a categorical and universal moral rule; the derivation of absolute property rights from the axiom of self-ownership

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785): the philosophical source of the categorical imperative structure that underlies both Humanist universal dignity theory and Libertarian rational-axiom ethics; the Epicurean account is the direct ancient alternative to the Kantian framework
- Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1954)
- Companion articles: "Epicurean Responses to the Intelligent Design Argument"; "Epicurus in the Modern World: What Stoics, Humanists, Buddhists, and the Faith Community Need to Understand"; "The Continued Vitality of Epicurean Physics"; "Let All Who Would Free Themselves From the False Claims of the Geometers Enter Here," EpicurusToday.com

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Not Opposites But Complements: The Epicurean View of Love and Hate

*Why the Same Logic That Unites Matter and Void, and Pleasure and Pain, Makes Love and Hate Inseparable*

One of the most persistent and damaging distortions of Epicurean philosophy is the picture of Epicurus as a quietist — a man who counseled his followers to withdraw from the world, suppress their emotions, and cultivate a kind of serene indifference toward everything outside their garden walls. On this reading, Epicurus emerges as a philosophical pacifist who regarded all conflict, all anger, and all vigorous opposition to wrongdoing as contrary to the good life. This picture is false from top to bottom, and the consequences of accepting it are severe: it produces not a version of Epicurus but a pale imitation of the Stoicism he spent his life opposing.

The truth is almost the reverse. A consistent reading of Epicurean philosophy — grounded in Epicurus's own texts, in the testimony of his most faithful followers, and in the lives of men and women who actually applied his teachings — produces a thinker who understood that love and hate are not opposites but **two expressions of the same underlying reality**. To love what is genuinely good is simultaneously to oppose what threatens it. Pleasure and pain are not two separate things but two poles of a single life-measuring faculty — and this pairing runs all the way down through Epicurean physics itself, where all of existence is composed of matter and void, two apparent opposites that are in fact the mutually necessary conditions of everything that exists. Neither matter nor void is intelligible without the other; neither pleasure nor pain is intelligible without the other; and neither love nor hate is intelligible without the other. Friendship and

enmity follow the same logic. An Epicurean who genuinely loves his friends, his family, and his freedom cannot be indifferent to those who would harm them. The capacity for natural, righteous anger is not a failure of Epicurean philosophy — it is one of its clearest predictions.

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## The Error of Quietism: How Misreading Entered the Record

To understand how Epicurus came to be misrepresented as a pacifist, it helps to identify who had the strongest motive for promoting that misreading. The answer, as it so often is when Epicurus has been distorted, is the competing philosophical schools — above all the Stoics, the Platonists, and later the Christian moralists — each of whom preferred a domesticated, de-fanged Epicurus to the real one.

The Stoics, in particular, built their entire emotional theory around the rejection of the passions (*apatheia* — literally, freedom from passion). For Stoics, anger was never rational, never natural, never justified. Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Epictetus all agreed on this point: to feel anger is to have already made an error of judgment. The Stoic sage is impervious to insult, untroubled by injury, and responds to wrongdoing not with emotion but with cold, detached duty.

It was tempting — and historically common — for commentators trained in Stoic assumptions to read Epicurean restraint through this same lens. When Epicurus warned against allowing anger to run unchecked, when he counseled caution in political involvement, when he described the ideal of a life lived in philosophical community rather than in the arena of public ambition, these positions were silently translated into Stoic terms and then attributed back to Epicurus. The result was an Epicurus who condemned all anger, who endorsed passive withdrawal from injustice, and who in effect agreed with his greatest rivals about the fundamental nature of the emotions.

This is exactly backwards. Epicurus rejected Stoic *apatheia* as deeply unnatural. He insisted that pleasure and pain — and the full range of emotional responses that flow from them — are the foundational data of a good life, not obstacles to

be overcome. The question was never whether to feel, but how to feel clearly and well.

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## Philodemus and the Treatise That Clarifies the Record

The most important ancient Epicurean text on the subject of anger survived by extraordinary luck. *On Anger* (*De Ira*), written by the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara in the first century BC, was buried under volcanic debris when Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD and sealed in the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. When the first excavations recovered charred papyrus scrolls in the eighteenth century, the first two-thirds of the text had been irretrievably destroyed. What remained, combined with careful modern scholarship — including multispectral imaging that has recovered additional readings — gives us a document of immense importance.

David Armstrong and Michael McOsker's 2020 critical edition and translation brings this document into sharp focus. *On Anger* gives us the most detailed surviving Epicurean treatment of what constitutes natural and praiseworthy anger, as distinguished from unnatural, empty rage. Philodemus was not innovating here — he was transmitting and developing a doctrine entirely consistent with Epicurus's own foundational framework of natural and empty desires, and drawing on a tradition that ran through his teacher Zeno of Sidon directly back to Epicurus himself. The fact that other ancient texts on this specific subject have not survived does not make the doctrine any less Epicurean; it makes the preservation of this particular scroll all the more fortunate. And what it preserves directly contradicts the quietist caricature.

The contrast Philodemus draws is not between feeling anger and not feeling it. It is between three very different kinds of anger: natural anger arising from real, intentional harm; the chronic, addictive fury of the unstable personality; and the empty, pleasure-seeking rage of the vindictive fool. Only the second and third types are condemned. The first — **natural anger** — Philodemus does not merely permit. He declares it *inescapable*.

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## Natural Anger: Inescapable, Not Merely Permissible

The Greek word Philodemus uses is *ἀνέκφευκτος* — **inescapable**. Anger, as a general kind, is inescapable for human beings. Natural anger in particular is inescapable "for the nature of humans." This is not a grudging concession; it is a strong philosophical claim. Philodemus is saying that any account of the good life that requires eliminating natural anger from the picture has already made a fundamental error about human nature.

Elizabeth Asmis, in her 2011 essay "The Necessity of Anger in Philodemus' *On Anger*" (in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, Cambridge University Press), showed that the key to understanding Philodemus's position lies in mapping anger onto Epicurus's familiar three-category classification of desires. Epicurus distinguished three kinds of desire: natural and necessary desires (food, shelter, friendship), natural but unnecessary desires (pleasures that are real but not essential), and empty desires (pursuits based on false beliefs, with no real foundation in pleasure or pain). Asmis's argument is that anger follows exactly the same structure. Natural anger responding to real, intentional harm is precisely analogous to a natural and necessary desire — it arises from reality, it is grounded in correct perception, and it cannot be eliminated without damage to the person who suppresses it.

Philodemus states this directly in the text. At column 37.24–39, he writes that natural anger, "taken in isolation, is an evil, since it is painful or is analogous to something painful, but if taken in conjunction with one's disposition, we think that it is something that may even be called a good. For it results from seeing what the nature of states of affairs is and from not having any false beliefs in our comparative calculations of our losses and in our punishments of those who harm us." (Armstrong and McOsker translation.)[1] The emotion is not condemned — it is validated, precisely because it tracks reality correctly. It is the product of clear-eyed assessment, not distortion.

The consequence the wise Epicurean reaches upon recognizing genuine harm is not pleasure in vengeance — Philodemus is entirely clear on this point. It is more like the grim determination of a patient accepting necessary surgery. As the

surviving text tells us, the Epicurean sage approaches anger not as something enjoyable: "[nor as to something enjoyable]—because it offers nothing sweet—but he approaches it as something most necessary but most unpleasurable, like drinking wormwood or the doctor's knife."[2] The action is taken because it must be taken, because the nature of things — justice included — demands it. There is no savoring of the enemy's suffering. There is simply the recognition that wrongdoing must be addressed, and a willingness to address it.

By contrast, the Stoic position held that there is **no such thing as any kind of rational or natural anger**. Every instance of anger, on the Stoic view, is a cognitive error — a false judgment that something bad has happened when the Stoic sage knows that nothing truly external can harm him. The Epicurean rejection of this view is total. Epicurus began his philosophy from the bedrock reality of pleasure and pain as natural guides. To say that a person who has been genuinely harmed — whose body, whose friends, whose freedom has been damaged by someone who acted intentionally — has made a cognitive error in feeling anger is, for the Epicurean, simply false. The pain is real. The harm is real. The anger that arises from correct perception of that harm is equally real, and equally natural.

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## The Logic of Love and Hate as a Single System

This brings us to the deeper philosophical point that the quietist reading completely misses: **in Epicurean philosophy, love and hate are not opposites but complements**. They are two aspects of the same truth-tracking emotional system. And this is not a point that requires any special argument about emotions — it follows directly from the foundational structure of Epicurean physics, and from the deliberate way Epicurus built his ethics on that physical foundation.

Epicurus taught that all of existence consists of exactly two things: matter and void. These look like opposites. Matter is something; void is nothing. But that framing is misleading. Matter and void are not rivals — they are the mutually necessary conditions of each other's intelligibility and of everything that exists. Without void, matter could not move, could not take distinct shapes, could not form the atoms that combine to make every object in the universe. Without mat-

ter, void would be a meaningless abstraction. They are not two competing principles but two aspects of a single reality. You cannot have one without the other, and the whole universe is built from their interaction.

Crucially, Epicurus did not merely assert that matter and void are the two components of the universe. He proved that they are **exhaustive** — that there is no third thing. Body is defined as that which possesses resistance; space is defined as that which lacks resistance. Since everything with independent existence must have volume and must be either resistant or non-resistant, there is no further possibility. The scheme is what we might call a formal binary: body and space are the formal contradictories of each other, and together they cover the entire universe with nothing left over.

David Sedley, in his essay "The Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics" (*Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 1998), has demonstrated that the parallel between this physical framework and the ethical framework is not a loose analogy or a teaching device.[3] It is the actual methodological skeleton on which Epicurus built the entire ethical system — and the similarity, as Sedley writes, is "so close that it cannot have been unconscious or accidental." Sedley shows that Epicurean ethics followed the same four-stage inferential procedure as Epicurean physics: first, a primitive mapping of the territory into its two fundamental constituents as self-evident facts established through feeling; second, conceptual amplification and defense of that mapping; third, a formal proof that the two constituents are exhaustive — that there is no third category; and fourth, the systematic elimination of any rival claimant to independent status.

In ethics, the two fundamental constituents are pleasure and pain. And Sedley's most important insight is that Epicurus applied the same formal binary move to ethics that he had applied to physics. In the physical exposition, Epicurus proved that everything with independent existence is either body or space — there is no third thing. In the ethical exposition, he eliminated the possibility of a neutral middle state between pleasure and pain. Any feeling that is not painful is thereby pleasant, and vice versa. Pleasure and pain, like body and space, are **formal contradictories**: each is defined as the absence of the other, and together they cover the entire domain of value with nothing left over.

This is a stronger claim than most readers of Epicurus appreciate. Pleasure and pain are not merely different experiences that happen to be present in any full human life. They are defined in terms of each other, such that neither is intelligible without the other. The removal of pain is itself a pleasure. The presence of pleasure is itself the absence of pain. They constitute a closed binary that maps all of value onto exactly two poles, just as matter and void map all of physical existence onto exactly two poles.

Pleasure and pain work exactly the same way in lived experience. Epicurus was emphatic that they are the two fundamental guides of life — the twin poles of the faculty by which we measure and navigate experience. They are not two separate things accidentally connected; they are two expressions of the same underlying sensitivity to what promotes or harms our life. A living being that could feel pleasure but not pain would have no way to recognize genuine danger. A living being that could feel pain but not pleasure would have no way to recognize genuine benefit. The two are inseparable aspects of the same nature, just as matter and void are inseparable aspects of the same universe.

Love and hate extend this formal structure into the social world.

Consider what it means to love something in Epicurean terms. To love your friends is not a vague sentiment — it is a recognition that their well-being is genuinely part of your pleasure, that their harm is genuinely your pain. Epicurean friendship (*philia*) is perhaps the most robustly defended value in the entire system. Epicurus famously wrote that "of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship."[4] This is not a decorative sentiment. Friendship, on Epicurean grounds, is woven into the fabric of what it means to live well.

But if the well-being of your friends is genuinely bound up with your own, then what happens when someone harms them? The answer is not mysterious. The same faculty that registers their flourishing as a source of pleasure will register their suffering as a source of pain. The same orientation toward them that produces gratitude when they are helped will produce anger when they are hurt. You cannot have one without the other. To say that a genuine Epicurean would feel warm gratitude toward those who benefit his friends but cool indifference toward those who harm them is to describe an emotional system that has been

partially severed — precisely the kind of distortion the three adulterating traditions (Stoicism, Platonism, and supernatural religion) were each, in their different ways, trying to produce.

Philodemus himself drew exactly this parallel. He compared the debt of natural anger toward those who intentionally harm us to the debt of natural gratitude toward those who benefit us. Both are responses to the actions of other conscious agents. Both are proportionate. Both are grounded in reality. A person who feels no gratitude and no anger has not achieved Epicurean wisdom — he has achieved emotional deadness, which is something else entirely.

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## The Difference Between Epicurean and Stoic Anger

It is worth being precise about what exactly Philodemus condemns, because the quietist misreading often works by conflating Epicurean caution about *how* to be angry with a Stoic rejection of anger *as such*.

What Philodemus condemns is not anger but **three specific corruptions of anger**:

**First**, he condemns *empty anger* (κενὴ ὀργή) — anger not grounded in real, intentional harm. The fool who flies into rage at accidents, at bad luck, at impersonal events, or at trivial slights is experiencing an emotion based on false beliefs. This is the anger of someone who imagines that the universe owes him smooth treatment, or who takes pleasure in imagining revenge for its own sake. This anger is genuinely destructive because it is not tracking anything real.

**Second**, he condemns *chronic fury* — the addictive, habitual rage of the person who has made anger a way of life. This is not natural anger extended; it is a disease of the soul, one that destroys the person's relationships, his capacity for philosophical progress, and his ability to enjoy life. The chronically angry person cannot advance in philosophy because he cannot think clearly.

**Third**, he condemns *disproportionate retaliation* — the specifically Achillean error of treating a wound to honor as equivalent to a wound to life and limb. Philodemus is clear that the Epicurean sage will never get angry for the reasons Achilles got angry. For readers unfamiliar with the reference: in Homer's *Iliad*,

Agamemnon publicly stripped Achilles of his war prize — a captive woman named Briseis — as an assertion of his superior rank. No physical harm was done. Achilles was not injured, not endangered, not deprived of anything essential to his survival or his friendships. What was damaged was his standing in the eyes of other warriors. His response was to withdraw from battle entirely, allowing thousands of his own comrades to die, and ultimately contributing to the death of his closest companion Patroclus — a catastrophe wildly out of proportion to the original slight. This is precisely the pattern Philodemus identifies as corrupt: anger mobilized in defense of pride rather than genuine harm, and pursued at a cost that no clear-eyed assessment of real goods and real losses could justify. The point of reference is not heroic pride but genuine harm.

What Philodemus explicitly endorses is the vigorous, decisive response to *real harm intentionally inflicted*. The surviving text states the principle directly: "the essence of natural anger is punishment of those who intentionally caused real harm and the removal of the possibility of further harm caused by the offenders or any others who might imitate them."[5] This is not passive. This is not indifferent. It is a prescription for action — action that is measured, grounded in reality, aimed at a specific and rational end (removing the source of harm), and taken with the grimness of necessity rather than the pleasure of cruelty.

As Armstrong and McOsker note in their critical edition: "**when Epicurean sages act in anger, they act vigorously and decisively**."[6] The text itself goes further still. Philodemus states that the wise man would be "**insane**" not to "grit his teeth and come back at him in one way or another" when genuine harm has been deliberately inflicted.[7] This is not the language of withdrawal. It is the language of a philosophy that takes real harm seriously and expects a real response.

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## Epicurus's Own Example: Anything But Quiet

There is something almost comic about describing Epicurus himself as a quietist. The historical Epicurus was one of the most energetically combative philosophers in the ancient world. He wrote prolifically — his collected works reportedly ran to over three hundred scrolls — and a substantial portion of that output was devoted to direct attacks on rival philosophers. He did not engage his

opponents in the polite manner of academic debate. He named them. He characterized their errors with biting precision. He reserved particularly pointed language for Plato, for the Skeptics, and for those he regarded as promoters of false philosophy.

The school he founded was explicitly evangelical. Unlike the Platonic Academy or the Stoic Stoa, the Epicurean Garden was designed to spread the philosophy beyond the walls of any single institution. Later followers like Diogenes of Oenoanda had the core teachings inscribed on a massive stone wall in a public square in what is now southern Turkey, so that passersby could encounter Epicurean philosophy without being able to avoid it. Lucretius, the great Roman Epicurean poet of the first century BC, opened *De Rerum Natura* with an invocation of Venus — Love herself — and structured his entire philosophical argument as an assault on the forces that keep human beings in fear and ignorance. This is not the work of someone who counseled passive withdrawal.

What Epicurus counseled was ***discernment*** — knowing which battles are worth fighting, which involvement will bring more pain than gain, and which engagements are likely to produce real benefit for oneself and one's friends. The default caution about political involvement was never an absolute prohibition. It was a practical recognition that most political arenas are dominated by ambition, vanity, and empty honor — precisely the empty desires Epicurean philosophy identifies as destructive. But when the circumstances were sufficiently extreme, when the harm was real and great and demanded action, the "no politics" rule could and did yield to something more fundamental: the Epicurean commitment to protection of genuine goods.

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## The Roman Generals: Epicureans Who Fought When It Mattered

The most powerful historical refutation of the quietist reading is the simple fact that some of the most important military and political actors of the late Roman Republic were committed Epicureans — and none of them saw any contradiction between their philosophy and their willingness to fight.

**Gaius Cassius Longinus** is the most famous example. As David Sedley documented in his important article "The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius" (*Journal of Roman Studies*, 1997), Cassius was a convinced Epicurean at the time of his greatest actions.[8] His conversion to Epicureanism around 48 BC initially accompanied a decision to withdraw from the civil conflict between Caesar and Pompey — a decision entirely consistent with the default Epicurean preference for avoiding political turmoil. But Cassius remained an Epicurean when he changed course completely. He organized the conspiracy against Julius Caesar in 44 BC and led armies in the field after the assassination, winning significant military victories in Syria before the final confrontation at Philippi in 42 BC. He fought and died as a Roman general and as an Epicurean.

Sedley's scholarship on this point is indispensable. He records that there was an Epicurean tradition, going back to Epicurus himself, of **suspending the general disinclination to political involvement when the situation demanded action**. He notes that this was an Epicurean tenet already familiar to Cicero, who recorded it in *On the Republic* (1.10), and that Seneca attributed the position directly to Epicurus himself. The "no politics" default was never an absolute principle but a context-sensitive judgment about where genuine goods were most likely to be found.

Sedley also records that Brutus — who was not himself an Epicurean, but who was working alongside Cassius — approached the Epicurean Statilius with the explicit question of whether participating in the conspiracy was philosophically permissible. The very fact that Brutus thought to ask an Epicurean this question tells us something important: it was not self-evident that an Epicurean would say no. And indeed, it was not obvious to Cassius either, since he did not say no.

We should not misread the character of Cassius. Shakespeare's rendering, influenced by Plutarch's partisan biography, gives us a cold schemer. The historical Cassius was a serious philosophical man who had thought carefully about justice, about genuine harm, and about when the calculus of benefit and cost required action rather than withdrawal. In Epicurean terms, the question was not whether tyranny was bad — it obviously was — but whether action to remove it was likely to produce more good than harm. When Cassius concluded that it was, he acted with the full force of his character and his military capability.

Principal Doctrine 6 provides the underlying framework: **"In order to obtain protection from other men, any means for attaining this end is a natural good."**[9] This is a strong and sweeping statement. It does not say "some peaceful means" or "modest defensive measures." It says *any means for attaining this end* is a natural good. The end — protection from those who would harm us — is grounded in the most basic facts of human nature. And the means, Epicurus says explicitly, are unrestricted by any additional qualification.

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## Justice As the Philosophical Foundation

The Epicurean account of justice, laid out in the Principal Doctrines, is equally far from quietism. Principal Doctrine 31 defines justice as an agreement among people neither to harm nor to be harmed — a compact rooted in the mutual recognition that harm is real and that its prevention is a genuine good.[10] Principal Doctrine 34 adds that injustice is not bad in itself in some abstract Platonic sense, but that the fear of detection and punishment makes it genuinely painful to those who practice it.[11] And Principal Doctrine 35 specifies that justice cannot exist without law and enforcement: it requires a social structure capable of actually deterring and punishing those who violate the compact.[12]

These are not the doctrines of a passive philosophy. They describe a framework in which harmful action by one party **justifies and requires** a response from the injured party and from the community. Anger at genuine injustice is not a departure from Epicurean philosophy — it is the natural emotional expression of a person who correctly perceives that the compact has been violated and that something must be done about it.

The relationship between justice and anger in Epicurean thought is therefore one of mutual support. Natural anger is the emotional signal that genuine harm has occurred. Justice is the social and rational framework within which that signal is correctly interpreted and correctly acted upon. A person who feels no anger at real injustice is failing to register correctly. A community that enforces no justice when the compact is violated will soon find that the compact is worthless. Both the emotion and the enforcement are necessary components of a genuinely Epicurean account of the good life.

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## Sedley's Two Contributions: Foundation and Text

David Sedley has made two distinct scholarly contributions that bear directly on the argument of this article, and it is worth drawing them together.

The first is the "Inferential Foundations" argument discussed above. Sedley shows, using Cicero's presentation of Torquatus in *On Ends* Book I as his primary evidence, that Epicurus built his ethics on exactly the same inferential foundation as his physics — a self-evident division of the territory into two fundamental categories, followed by conceptual amplification, followed by a formal proof of exhaustiveness. In physics the two categories are body and space. In ethics the two categories are pleasure and pain. In his own summary, Sedley traces the parallelism 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."[13] This is not a teaching analogy — it is the actual architecture of Epicurean thought, and it runs from the deepest level of physics straight through to the foundations of ethics and, as we have argued, to the emotional structure that follows from those foundations.

The second Sedley contribution concerns the textual evidence for Philodemus's *On Anger*. He was, as Voula Tsouna notes in her comprehensive *Ethics of Philodemus*, the first scholar to characterize and warn against what he called "bracket blindness" — the tendency of scholars to overlook the brackets surrounding editorial restorations in fragmentary papyrus texts, and then to develop interpretations based on what may be largely conjectural reconstructions. This methodological caution is essential when working with *On Anger*, where the first two-thirds of the text have been lost and portions of the remainder are heavily restored.

What Sedley's methodological care reinforces, paradoxically, is the strength of the conclusions we *can* draw from *On Anger*, because the passages most relevant to our argument are among the best-attested in the surviving text. The core thesis — that natural anger is inescapable, that the wise man acts against those who cause real intentional harm, and that this action is vigorous and decisive — is not

reconstructed from lacunae. It is what the text actually says in its clearest passages.

Taken together, these two contributions form a powerful arch. Sedley's "Inferential Foundations" work shows that the philosophical system requires a complementary treatment of positive and negative values at the foundational level. His work on the Philodemus text shows that the ancient Epicureans actually developed exactly such a treatment when they turned to the specific topic of anger. The philosophical architecture and the surviving textual evidence point in the same direction.

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## Epicurus Against the Pacifist Reading: The Letter to Menoeceus

Even the Letter to Menoeceus — Epicurus's most personal and accessible philosophical letter, the one most often quoted by those who want a gentle, contemplative Epicurus — contains no endorsement of passivity in the face of genuine harm. What it contains is a careful account of the conditions for genuine pleasure and the means of achieving it, which emphatically includes the development of practical wisdom — the capacity to judge correctly in complex situations, to weigh costs and benefits, and to act well under uncertainty.

Practical wisdom is not a passive capacity. It is precisely the rational faculty that enables the wise man to distinguish natural anger from empty rage, to judge when action is required and when restraint is better, and to pursue what is genuinely good with the full force of a well-ordered character. The Epicurean who has developed practical wisdom to its fullest extent is not a person who sits quietly while wrongdoers flourish around him. He is a person who knows when and how to act — and who acts with the decisive courage of someone whose response is grounded in reality, not distorted by pride, fear, or the empty desire for revenge.

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## The Stoics Were the Pacifists

A final correction is worth making explicit: if the ancient philosophical tradition contains a school that genuinely counseled emotional suppression and passive endurance of external circumstances, it is **the Stoics**, not the Epicureans.

The Stoics taught that virtue alone is the good, that external circumstances — including the death of friends, the loss of health, the oppression of tyrants — are at worst "preferred indifferents," and that the truly wise man remains undisturbed in the face of all of them. Marcus Aurelius, writing as Emperor of Rome, counseled himself to feel no anger even at those who wronged him. Seneca, who was one of the most prolific ancient writers on anger, devoted three books (*De Ira*) to arguing that anger is never rational, never justified, and always harmful to the person who feels it.

For the Stoic, this position is internally consistent: if nothing external truly harms the wise man, then there is nothing to be angry about. The pain is always, in the end, a cognitive error.

For the Epicurean, this position is a form of philosophical dishonesty. Pain is real. Harm is real. The person who denies that he has been genuinely harmed when he clearly has is not wise — he is deluded, or lying. Natural anger, arising from the correct perception of real intentional harm, is not a cognitive error. It is what an honest, clear-eyed person feels. And it appropriately drives him to act.

The quietist misreading of Epicurus is, at its root, a Stoicization of Epicurus — a smuggling of Stoic emotional theory into a philosophy that was built precisely to reject it.

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## What a Consistent Epicurean Looks Like

Let us close by drawing the portrait of the consistent Epicurean that emerges from this analysis.

He is a person who loves deeply — his friends, his family, the philosophical community that sustains him, the good life he has worked to build. He is capable of intense gratitude toward those who help him and genuine affection toward those who share his values.

He is also a person who can hate clearly — who recognizes that those who intentionally harm what he loves are genuinely opposed to his good, and who does not pretend otherwise. His hatred is not chronic fury, not vindictive cruelty, not the empty pleasure of imagining an enemy's pain. It is the straightforward recognition that certain people, by their actions, have placed themselves in opposition to genuine goods.

When those people threaten what he loves with real harm, he acts — vigorously and decisively, as Philodemus says — with the grimness of necessity rather than the pleasure of cruelty. He does not enjoy the conflict. He engages it because it must be engaged.

He does not make politics a way of life, but he is not indifferent to politics when the stakes are high enough. He knows, as Cassius Longinus knew, that there are moments when withdrawal is not wisdom but abdication — when the harm is real enough and great enough that action is what the nature of things requires.

He is not a Stoic. He is not a quietist. He is not a pacifist.

He is an Epicurean.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Not A Bunker But A Camp

*An Epicurean response to Massimo Pigliucci's March 3, 2026. article on Epicurus, the Stoics, and political engagement*

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Massimo Pigliucci's essay "The Garden Or The Forum: Epicurus, The Stoics, And The Duty To Engage" represents precisely the kind of Stoic-inflected reading of Epicurus that has dominated popular philosophy for decades and that has consistently produced a distorted portrait of true Epicurean philosophy. It is wrong about Epicurus at nearly every key point – not through mere carelessness, but through a pattern of misreading that is characteristic of interpreters who approach Epicurean texts through frameworks shaped by Stoic, Humanist, and Judeo-Christian assumptions. These assumptions are so deeply embedded in Western intellectual culture that they are rarely recognized as assumptions at all. The errors in this essay are not random; they flow from a single misidentification at the foundation: Pigliucci defines Epicureanism as "rooted in the pursuit of ataraxia (tranquillity, or freedom from mental disturbance)" and treats this as the *telos*, the goal of the philosophy.[1] Every subsequent argument – about politics, engagement, "loopholes," and the meaning of justice – inherits this foundational mistake. The refutation must therefore begin there.

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## I. The False Foundation: Ataraxia Is Not the Telos

Pigliucci opens his analysis by stating that Epicurus's ethical system is "rooted in the pursuit of *ataraxia* (tranquillity, or freedom from mental disturbance)."[2] He repeats this characterization throughout: Epicureans seek "peace of mind," aim at "the overall goal" of ataraxia, and everything – friendship, law, politics – is evaluated by the "ataraxian calculus." This is the most consequential error in the essay, and it is one shared by a wide range of modern scholarship on Epicurus. It is nevertheless wrong, and the ancient texts are clear on the matter.

Epicurus himself (followed by many subsequent ancient Epicureans) states with clarity that the goal of life is Pleasure, not "Tranquility." *"For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear... Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life."* (*Letter to Menoeceus*, Diogenes Laertius 10.128–129).[3] The telos is not tranquility. The telos is **happiness** (*eudaimonia*), defined as a life in which **pleasures predominate over pains**. This is not a subtle distinction. Epicurus uses the term ataraxia – the absence of mental disturbance – to refer to *one form of pleasure*, not to refer to pleasure as a whole, as pleasure also includes joy, delight, and the many active pleasures of life which are not at all always "calm." Calmness of mind is *one component* of the good life, and a *tool* for achieving it, but not its definition or goal. This conflation of a part of the goal with the entirety of the goal is best revealed by observing this key point: Whether as stated in Principal Doctrine Three, in Epicurus' letter to Menoeceus, or in Torquatus' extensive dialog with Cicero, the point is that just as the entire universe of things can be categorized into matter and void, the entire universe of "feeling" can be categorized into pleasure and pain. And just as where no space exists there must be matter, where no pain exists there must be pleasure. This is an expansive view of pleasure that Cicero and subsequent generations of Stoics and anti-Epicureans refuse to accept, but it is the foundation of a persuasive and perfectly logical ethical system based on feeling, rather than on false views of the nature of the universe. Pigliucci's error is grounded in following the anti-Epicurean consensus that traces its line back through Plutarch and Cicero to Socrates himself, who a leading ancient Epicurean described as the "Attic Buffoon."

Why does this error recur so persistently in modern scholarship? The most probable explanation is that the concept of "tranquility" as the highest human goal resonates with traditions shaped by Stoic ethics, by Christian ideals of inner peace, and by the broader Humanist assumption that what distinguishes the philosopher is the subordination of passion and desire to a calm, rational equilibrium. These frameworks are so culturally pervasive that when a reader encounters Epicurus using the word *ataraxia*, it is almost reflexively read as the end goal – because it *would* be the end goal in any of those other traditions. But Epicurus was not a Stoic, not a Christian, and not a Humanist. He was a philosopher who followed Nature and declared pleasure to be the guide, beginning, and end of the blessed life, and who meant it literally.

The practical consequences of this misidentification are severe. If the goal is tranquility, then political engagement becomes suspect almost by definition, since politics is often noisy, risky, and disturbing. But if the goal is the predominance of pleasure over pain – which includes the pleasures of friendship, civic contribution, intellectual life, and a wide range of active engagement with the world – then the calculus is far more open. Epicurus never said "maximize tranquility." He said in effect "maximize the conditions under which your life is a happy one." These are not the same instruction, and conflating them has produced generations of misreadings of Epicurean ethics.

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## II. The "Duty" Framework Is Smuggled In, Not Argued For

The entire essay is structured around a contrast between Stoic "duty" and Epicurean self-interest. Pigliucci concludes that Stoicism asks "What is my duty to the world?" while Epicureanism asks "What is the most painless way to navigate this mess?"[4] The Stoic "duty to engage" is presented as the admirable standard against which Epicurus is measured and found wanting.

This framing smuggles in the Stoic conclusion as the evaluative premise. Epicurus did not merely *fail* to ground ethics in duty – he *deliberately rejected* the concept. The Stoic notion of "duty" (*kathekon*) rests on theological foundations: we have duties because we are fragments of the divine Logos, because Zeus/Providence has structured the universe as a rational whole in which each part has

a role to play. Epicurus rejected every element of this framework. There are no divine purposes. The universe has no design. There is no cosmic citizenship, no Logos assigning us obligations, no divine governance conferring duties.

The concept of duty as a self-justifying moral category – the idea that obligations exist independently of their consequences for actual human happiness – is itself a product of exactly the traditions that have most distorted the reading of Epicurus. Stoic cosmic duty, Judeo-Christian divine command, and Kantian moral obligation are structurally identical in this respect: each posits a source of binding obligation that transcends the natural guidance of pleasure and pain. Epicurus recognized this structure and rejected it as mythology dressed in philosophical language. When modern scholarship evaluates Epicurean ethics by asking "but what is the Epicurean *duty*?", it is asking a question that presupposes the very framework Epicurus was refuting.

To say that Epicureanism "lacks a duty to engage" is a Stoic criticism, not a neutral philosophical observation. An Epicurean would respond: on what basis does this "duty" rest? If it rests on a provident universe governed by divine reason, that is mythology. If it rests on "natural sociability," the Epicurean has a perfectly coherent account of social bonds grounded in pleasure, friendship, and the security provided by mutual agreement – without requiring the apparatus of cosmic duty. The absence of Stoic duty from Epicurean ethics is a feature, not a deficiency.

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## III. The Textual Evidence Does Not Say What Pigliucci Claims

**On Principal Doctrine 14.**[5] Pigliucci quotes PD 14 – "the purest security comes from solitude and breaking away from the herd" – as "perhaps the most direct textual evidence for the Epicurean rejection of public life." This is a misreading of what "the herd" means in this context. The Epicurean texts use "the many" (*hoi polloi*) and cognate expressions consistently to refer not to fellow citizens as such, but to those *driven by irrational fears and vain desires* – the crowd stampeding after fame, wealth, and power as remedies for existential anxieties they have never examined. The "purest security" PD 14 advocates is a *psychologic-*

*al* achievement: freedom from those very anxieties. It is not a geographical prescription to leave town.

Pigliucci himself quotes PD 7 immediately afterward, which confirms this reading: the problem with political ambition is when it is pursued by people whose underlying fears and desires are insatiable – for whom "the empty opinions of others" remain a source of disturbance because they have never addressed the root cause. The argument is not "don't engage with the city." The argument is "don't pursue power as a cure for irrational fear, because it cannot cure what it didn't cause."

**On Vatican Saying 58.**[6] Pigliucci cites VS 58 – "We must free ourselves from the prison of public education and politics" – as a "blunt dismissal of the political life." The Vatican Sayings are a late collection of uncertain provenance, and VS 58 is among the most contested in terms of text, context, and meaning. The Greek word translated as "politics" here is *politeia*, which can mean the conventional structures of public social formation – not "civic participation" as such but the unreflective conformism of received opinion and institutional pressure. Read in context, it is an exhortation to think independently rather than a counsel to abstain from civic life. Not only VS 58 but also many other fragments presume an understanding of Epicurean premises which are exactly opposite of those which Stoics like Pigliucci presume to be understood. Read coherently and in a manner consistent with the fundamental premises of the philosophy they lead to conclusions diametrically opposite to those reached by many modern readers.

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## IV. The "Loopholes" Argument Gets the Relationship Between Theory and Evidence Exactly Backwards

This is the most consequential structural error in Pigliucci's essay. Having established (on the basis of the above misplaced textual readings) that Epicurus's "default" was withdrawal, Pigliucci then addresses the abundant historical evidence of Epicurean political engagement by labeling it a set of "loopholes" – a "Safety and Stability" exception, a "Natural Disposition" exception – that allowed occasional departures from the real Epicurean norm. He even remarks that the "Nat-

ural Disposition" loophole "begins to me to look not much like Epicureanism at all" – which is to say, when the evidence contradicts the theory, his instinct is to question the evidence rather than the theory.[7]

This framework has the relationship between theory and evidence exactly reversed. As Aoiz and Boeri demonstrate at length in *Theory and Practice in Epicurean Political Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2023), the historical and epigraphic record shows Epicureans *routinely and consistently* engaged in civic, diplomatic, religious, and political life across five centuries and across the entire Greek and Roman world. The evidence is not a few embarrassing exceptions to a withdrawal principle. It is a sustained pattern that the withdrawal principle cannot account for. Among the documented cases: Cineas of Thessaly as Pyrrhus's chief diplomat; Philonides of Laodicea as royal adviser to the Seleucid king Demetrius I; Apollophanes of Pergamon conducting his city's affairs in Rome; multiple Epicureans serving as priests of imperial and local cults, as prophets, as ambassadors, as civic magistrates – inscriptions naming them proudly as Epicurean philosophers while doing so (Ch. 6, §3). The proper conclusion is not that these people found "loopholes" in Epicurean doctrine. It is that the withdrawal reading of that doctrine is wrong.

The "loophole" framing is, as Aoiz and Boeri document, precisely the strategy of Epicurus's ancient opponents – Cicero, Plutarch, Epictetus – who also acknowledged in practice that Epicureans engaged in political life while insisting in theory that they were being inconsistent. Even Epictetus, while condemning Epicurean "antisocial" views, *simultaneously admitted* that Epicureans "marry and beget children and fulfil the duties of citizens and get themselves appointed priests and prophets" (*Dissertations* 2.20) – inadvertently confirming the very engagement he was denouncing.[8] Pigliucci, without recognizing it, reproduces the ancient anti-Epicurean polemical strategy intact.

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## V. The Treatment of Atticus and Cassius Is Inaccurate

Pigliucci presents Titus Pomponius Atticus as someone who "decided to leave Rome and spend his life in self-imposed exile in Athens" – the paradigmatic Epi-

curean response to political upheaval.[9] This portrait is wrong about what Atticus actually did.

Atticus was one of the most politically connected figures in Rome during one of its most turbulent periods. He was banker, publisher, and intimate adviser to leading political figures across all factions – including Cicero, Mark Antony, and Augustus. His correspondence network spanned the entire Roman world. He managed enormous financial operations entangled with Roman political life at every level. Pigliucci's claim that he "spent his life in self-imposed exile" confuses Atticus's decision to live for some years in Athens – where he also had extensive financial and social interests – with permanent withdrawal from political life. As Aoiz and Boeri describe, Atticus practiced what they call "vigilant neutrality": not disengagement, but a shrewd Epicurean cultivation of personal security through friendship, appropriate action, and declining the pursuit of unlimited political power, while remaining deeply embedded in the political world. Atticus died in his eighties, wealthy and respected. This is not a portrait of withdrawal; it is a portrait of sophisticated civic engagement conducted on Epicurean terms.

On Cassius: Pigliucci frames his participation in the assassination of Caesar as a "Safety and Stability loophole." But Cassius's own letters to Cicero – in which he explicitly defends Epicurean doctrine against Cicero's criticisms and argues that living pleasurably *requires* living justly and nobly, not in spite of it – demonstrate a principled Epicurean justification for political action grounded in the philosophy itself, not a reluctant resort to an exception clause. The loophole framing reduces a philosophically sophisticated man's considered political action to mere self-preservation. Cassius engaged because engagement was consistent with his Epicurean understanding of the good life, not because a default withdrawal principle had been momentarily suspended.

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## VI. Epicureanism Is Not "a Philosophy of Survival"

Pigliucci writes that "Epicureanism was, above all, a philosophy of survival."[10] This reduction follows directly from the ataraxia misidentification and the implicit Stoic evaluative standard operating throughout the essay, but it is contradicted by the primary sources.

Epicureanism is a philosophy of *happiness* - of flourishing through pleasure - of the richest possible life available to a natural creature in a natural world. Epicurus valued friendship as "by far the greatest" of all the goods wisdom provides (*Principal Doctrine* 27).[11] He valued intellectual pleasure, the pleasures of learning, of philosophy, of memory, of conversation, and of community. He wrote prolifically and engaged correspondents across the Mediterranean. His school was a camp of committed friends with an outward focus on bringing true philosophy to an ever-expanding range of people, not a bunker clinging to simple survival. The image of Epicureans as risk-averse minimalists sheltering from the world is a caricature assembled from hostile ancient sources and filtered through subsequent cultural frameworks that found pleasure-based ethics philosophically suspect – because those frameworks were, at root, committed to different and incompatible accounts of what made a human life valuable. Such slanders against the Epicureans say much more about the presumptions and faults of those who generated those accusations than against the Epicureans.

The related claim that "justice is a shield, not a calling" and "politics is a trap" is similarly a distortion. Epicurean justice is contractual rather than divinely ordained – but the contract theory does not reduce justice to a merely defensive personal tool. Hermarchus and Lucretius argue that justice and law made civilized life possible and continue to provide the security without which a genuinely good life cannot be lived. Epicureans recognize the polis not as a necessary evil but as a positive precondition of everything they value. Philodemus argues explicitly that the Epicurean philosopher should advise rulers, educate the young in law-abiding, and contribute to better governance – not from Stoic duty, but because it genuinely serves the good life of everyone involved (*On the Good King According to Homer*; *On Rhetoric*).

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## VII. The Real Contrast Between Epicurus and the Stoics on Politics

Pigliucci's concluding comparison between the two schools – framed as Stoic duty versus Epicurean self-interest, with the Epicurean column defined throughout by ataraxia-seeking – is distorted by the same foundational misreading that

runs through the entire essay. The genuine contrast is both more interesting and more philosophically significant.

Stoicism presupposes a positive *obligation* to political engagement rooted in *cosmic duty*: we are fragments of the divine Logos, human beings are social not simply by nature but in a deep metaphysical sense, and justice is an absolute that is written into the fabric of the universe. Whether one finds this framework compelling depends entirely on whether one accepts its theological foundations – a provident universe, a governing divine reason, a cosmic human nature. Epicurean philosophy rejects all of that, and does so on well-reasoned philosophical grounds.

Epicureanism generates a *strong positive motivation* for civic engagement rooted in nature's guidance through pleasure and pain, without any false appeal to metaphysical obligation. Engagement – when pursued on the right terms, for the right reasons – is genuinely pleasurable: it satisfies the deep human goods of friendship, contribution, intellectual life, and the security that comes from living in a well-ordered society. What Epicurus rejected was not civic engagement but the *anxious pursuit* of unlimited political power as a remedy for irrational fear – the compulsive striving for fame and dominance driven not by genuine assessment of what brings safety and happiness but by the existential anxiety that leads people to fear the gods and death.

Epicurean philosophy is a genuine philosophical revolution that deserves evaluation on its own terms, not through distorted prisms of Stoicism, Humanism, and Judeo-Christianity. The difference between Epicurus and his detractors does not come down to engagement vs. withdrawal. The difference is that of engagement grounded in false ideas of cosmic duty deriving from a "true world" beyond the senses vs. engagement grounded in the rational pursuit of genuine human happiness under terms set by Nature. Epicurean philosophy is fully capable of producing politically active, civically engaged people. The five-century historical record of Epicureanism in the ancient world confirms this, and the evidence continues today in men as diverse as Thomas Jefferson, who approvingly and specifically cited Epicurus in his private letters, and Frederich Nietzsche, who embodied Epicurean arguments in his *Twilight of the Idols, Antichrist,* and many other works. The Stoic enters the forum from a false perception of the universe

and of *duty.* The Epicurean participates in the forum and every other aspect of life because it preserves and advances the genuine happiness of himself and his friends. The difference lies goes to the heart of one's assessment of the universe and one's place in it, not in any reflexive preference for selfish retreat over civic engagement.

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## Conclusion: Epicurean Philosophy Is A Camp, Not a Bunker

Pigliucci's essay ultimately reproduces an ancient anti-Epicurean polemic with modern philosophical packaging – and it does so through the same mechanisms that have distorted the reading of Epicurus since antiquity: the imposition of a Stoic evaluative framework that treats duty as self-evidently foundational, a residual Judeo-Christian suspicion of pleasure as a legitimate philosophical category, and a broadly Humanist assumption that the good person is defined by rational self-restraint and service rather than by the intelligent pursuit of genuine happiness based on pleasure. These lenses are so thoroughly embedded in Western academic philosophy that they operate largely invisibly, producing confident misreadings that feel like plain common sense.

The structure of Pigliucci's argument is identical to Cicero's: take the slogans "live unnoticed" and "do not participate in politics" out of their context, treat the abundant counter-evidence as mere exceptions, contrast Epicurean pleasure-seeking with Stoic duty, and conclude that Epicureans are civic free-riders. Cicero knew perfectly well that Cassius, Atticus, Torquatus, Trebatius, and many others were Epicureans – he corresponded with them and he knew well that Julius Caesar's camp had spawned a new generation of young Epicureans – yet Cicero persisted in the same portrait anyway, because his purpose was polemical, not interpretive. The portrait has survived largely intact into modern popular philosophy, and this essay is another iteration.

The actual Epicurean position, read directly from the texts and confirmed by the historical record, is that Epicurus was a loyal citizen of Athens who loved his city, respected its laws and institutions, engaged in its religious life, deposited his works in its public archive, and cultivated friendships with politicians. Epicureans across five centuries served as diplomats, royal advisers, priests, ambassadors,

legal experts, and civic leaders, without their Epicureanism being thought inconsistent with any of it. The Garden was not outside the city walls in any philosophically meaningful sense. The Garden itself was located closer to the city gates than was the Academy, and the House of Epicurus was located within the walls and near the city center. Throughout its ancient history the philosophy of Epicurus produced a community of people who learned to engage with the world on the basis of honest reasoning about nature and happiness based on the feelings given us by nature rather than religious or rationalistic fantasies – and that possibility remains open to those of us today who are willing to engage with what the record actually shows, rather than how the Stoics and Humanists and Abrahamists would prefer that we interpret it.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# The Half-Full Cup: The Corruption Caused By The Gospel of 'Enough

Here is the version of Epicurean philosophy you will encounter most frequently in popular books, YouTube videos, and philosophy podcasts: Epicurus teaches us to reduce our desires. To appreciate simple pleasures. To stop chasing what we don't have and be grateful for what we do. To cultivate contentment. To find peace in enough.

It sounds reasonable. It sounds wise. It even sounds, in certain respects, like a valid description of what a philosopher who talks about "absence of pain" might teach.

It is also, taken as a complete summary of his philosophy, a catastrophic error — one that has done more damage to people who might genuinely benefit from Epicurean ideas than any frontal attack on the philosophy ever could. Because it sounds plausible enough, it inoculates its recipients against the actual philosophy. It gives them a comfortable half-truth and sends them away before they ever encounter the real argument.

The real argument is this: you have one life. It will end. The time for your happiness is now, not later, not in some future state of philosophical refinement, not after you have managed your desires down to a level your circumstances can comfortably satisfy. The natural goal of that life — the thing that nature itself, through the feelings it gave you from birth, has been telling you the whole time — is pleasure. Not modest pleasure. Not carefully calibrated pleasure. Not the pleasure of a person who has successfully lowered their expectations. The *fullest possible* pleasure, the kind that fills the cup completely and leaves nothing wasted on the table.

The philosophy of Epicurus is not a philosophy of enough. It is a philosophy of full.

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## Which Pleasure? Yours.

Before going further, a question that every reader has the right to ask: when we say that Epicurus calls us to pursue the fullest possible pleasure, whose pleasure are we talking about, and what does it consist of?

This question calls for a direct answer, because a great deal of confusion about Epicurean philosophy flows from the assumption that "pleasure is the goal" must mean either (a) a specific list of approved pleasures, or (b) a license for any and all gratification without limit. Epicurus anticipated both misreadings in his own lifetime and rejected them both. The *Letter to Menoeceus* addresses this directly: when Epicurus says pleasure is the goal, he does not mean the pleasures of the glutton or the sensualist — and the reason is not that physical pleasure is suspect, but that gratification without wisdom fails on its own terms, producing more pain than pleasure in the long run.

But here is what that disclaimer does *not* mean, and what the "enough" reading wrongly converts it to mean: it does not mean that Epicurus is prescribing a specific, modest, uniform level of pleasure as the correct target for everyone. He is not. The Epicurean goal is not a particular lifestyle. It is a method.

The method is this: use reason — what Epicurus calls *prudence*, the most important of all the virtues — to evaluate honestly what genuinely produces more pleasure than pain in *your* life, given your own nature, your own circumstances, your own capacities, and your own preferences. Then pursue what that honest calculation points to, and cut what it tells you to cut.

This is a radically personal framework. The Epicurean is not handed a prescribed life. They are handed a tool — pleasure and pain as nature's instruments of evaluation — and told to use it honestly. For one person, the full cup is built from deep friendships, intellectual exploration, and the pleasures of a well-run household. For another, it is built from physical achievement, mastery of a craft, and the pride of work done excellently. For a third, it might require genuine risk and

reach — the kind of adventure that would strike the "enough" advocate as unnecessary, even reckless, but that fills *that* particular person's cup in a way that no safer alternative could.

What these lives have in common is not their content. It is their completeness — the honest, reasoned, fully engaged pursuit of everything that genuinely satisfies, for that individual, without holding back out of false modesty, cultural pressure, or the philosophical timidity that passes for wisdom in the "enough" tradition.

This is why self-knowledge is not an optional supplement to Epicurean philosophy. It is its foundation. You cannot calculate what genuinely satisfies you without first knowing what you actually are — what your nature inclines you toward, what your circumstances actually allow, what the real costs and real returns of your available options are. The person who has never seriously asked what they want from life cannot apply Epicurean philosophy effectively, because the tool requires an honest input to produce an honest output. The "enough" reading short-circuits this entirely by supplying the answer before the question has been asked: you already have enough, you just haven't properly appreciated it. It removes the need for self-examination by declaring the calculation already complete.

The further point — the one the "enough" reading consistently suppresses — is that this personal calculation is not a one-time event. It is ongoing. Circumstances change. Capacities develop or diminish. What genuinely satisfies at twenty may not be what genuinely satisfies at forty-five, and the Epicurean who is paying attention will recognize this and adjust. The philosophy does not lock you into a fixed level of aspiration. It requires you to keep asking the question honestly, for as long as you live.

What it does not permit — what Vatican Saying 63 explicitly rules out — is the decision to stop asking the question at all, to declare yourself content with whatever your circumstances have delivered, and to call that contentment wisdom.[1] That is not self-knowledge. That is the philosophical surrender of the self-examination that makes genuine pleasure possible in the first place.

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## "But I Get Pleasure From Trimming My Toenails"

At this point a sharp-eyed critic will raise an objection that calls for a direct answer: if Epicurus says pleasure is the goal, and pleasure is whatever an individual genuinely experiences as pleasurable, what stops someone from saying — "I get pleasure from trimming my toenails. Why isn't it perfectly consistent with Epicurean philosophy to spend all my time doing that?"

The objection is not frivolous. It is the classic reductio ad absurdum of any philosophy that makes pleasure the standard: if any pleasure counts, then trivial pleasures count, and there is no principled basis for preferring a richer life over a narrower one. If the only test is "does this produce pleasure," then toenail trimming passes the test.

But this objection misreads the test. Epicurus does not ask merely "does this produce pleasure?" He asks: "does this produce the *greatest* pleasure available to me, across the full range of my natural capacities, over the course of my actual life?" These are entirely different questions, and the second one eliminates toenail trimming immediately — not because toenail trimming is wicked, but because it fails comprehensively on the fuller accounting.

The first failure is quantitative. Epicurus's treatment of pleasure is strictly comparative: greater or lesser, longer or shorter, more or fewer, more or less intense. A life organized around toenail trimming is a life that has permanently foreclosed access to the full range of pleasures that a human being is capable of experiencing — the pleasures of genuine friendship, of intellectual engagement, of physical health and activity, of meaningful work, of the kind of community that provides genuine security. Against those, the pleasure of toenail trimming is not merely smaller. It is categorically less — less lasting, less connected to anything that compounds over time, less capable of filling the cup that the full range of human capacity makes possible.

The second failure is natural. Epicurus grounds his entire account of pleasure in what *nature* has provided as the standard of the good. Human beings are not toenail-trimming animals. They are social animals, reasoning animals, animals with bodies that flourish through use and relationships that deepen through sus-

tained investment. The natural desires — for nourishment, for shelter, for friendship, for understanding — are not arbitrary items on a list. They are the desires that correspond to what human nature actually is, and their satisfaction is pleasurable precisely because nature has constructed them that way. A life that satisfies only the toenail-trimming impulse while leaving the natural desires unaddressed is not a life of sufficient pleasure. It is a life of deprivation dressed up as satisfaction.

The third failure is what the *Letter to Menoeceus* identifies as the guiding virtue of Epicurean life: prudence. Epicurus says explicitly that prudence — practical wisdom, the honest calculation of what genuinely maximizes pleasure over time — is the greatest good, even more valuable than philosophy itself. Prudence applied to the toenail question produces an immediate verdict: this activity, pursued exclusively, generates a fraction of the pleasure that the same time and energy invested in genuine goods would produce. A person of prudence does not need a rule against toenail trimming. They have a calculator that tells them, clearly and without sentimentality, that better options exist and are within reach.

This is why the Epicurean framework is not a charter for laziness, passivity, or trivial self-indulgence — which is exactly what the "toenail trimming" objection implies it must be. It is a demanding philosophy. It requires you to identify what your nature actually is, what genuine goods are actually available to you, and what the honest calculation of costs and returns actually shows across the full span of a life. Toenail trimming fails every one of those tests. So does the half-lived life of managed contentment that the "enough" reading recommends. Both are forms of the same error: accepting a fraction of what is available and calling the fraction sufficient.

Vatican Saying 41 captures the Epicurean answer to the toenail objection more vividly than any abstract argument could: "We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."[2] This is not a description of a man who has found his pleasure in a small, repetitive, isolated activity. It is a description of a man living at full engagement — thinking, laughing, working, connecting, advocating — because that is what fills a human cup, and he knows it.

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## The Hidden Premise: Desire as the Enemy

Before examining the textual record, it is worth identifying the philosophical assumption that makes the "enough" reading seem plausible — because the assumption is never stated openly. If it were stated openly, its incompatibility with Epicurean philosophy would be immediately apparent.

The assumption is this: *every unsatisfied desire is painful, and therefore the fewer desires you have, the less you suffer.*

You do not need to know anything about Eastern philosophy to find this logic compelling. It presents itself as a straightforward inference from Epicurean premises. The argument runs like this: Epicurus says the goal of life is the absence of pain. Every time you want something you don't have, that wanting is itself a form of pain — a gap, a dissatisfaction, an ache. Therefore the logical Epicurean project is to close the gap not by getting what you want but by wanting less. Train yourself to need only what you already have, and the pain of unfulfilled desire disappears. The fewer desires you carry, the more reliably you can satisfy them all, and the less you suffer from wanting what is out of reach.

This argument is worth taking seriously — and then demolishing.

Before doing so, one point must be made clearly, because it shapes everything that follows: Epicurus is not an enemy of logical argument. He does not reject the chain of reasoning above because it is too cold, too systematic, or too rationalist. He was himself a careful logician — perhaps the most systematic thinker in the ancient world on questions of how knowledge is acquired and verified. What Epicurus insists on — and what separates his approach from the purely deductive philosophies he opposed, Platonic and Stoic alike — is that every logical argument must ultimately be answerable to sensation. A premise that cannot be grounded in actual human experience, verified by what the senses and the feelings genuinely report, is not a premise at all. It is an unanchored abstraction, and no amount of valid reasoning from an unanchored abstraction can produce a reliable conclusion about how to live.

This matters directly for the argument under examination. The claim that every unsatisfied desire is painful is not a logical necessity. It is an empirical claim

about human experience. Epicurus's response to it is not "your logic is bad" but "go and look at what sensation actually reports." And when you do that — when you apply the Epicurean test honestly — the premise does not survive.

The first problem is with the premise. Epicurus does not define the goal of life as "absence of pain" in isolation, as if pain-avoidance were the whole of the project. He defines the goal as *pleasure* — with the absence of pain being in one context a definitional statement of pleasure itself (absence of pain quantitatively equals pleasure as there are only two feelings) or in another context the theoretical upper limit of what pleasure can reach (as a response to the Platonic argument that pleasure can always be made better by adding more). "Absence of pain" superficially understood is not the sufficient condition for a good life. The distinction matters enormously. A stone feels no pain. A person under general anesthesia feels no pain. A life reduced to the minimum necessary to avoid all discomfort feels no unnecessary pain. None of these is what Epicurus is recommending. He is recommending a life of active, genuine, fully-realized pleasure — and absence of pain is the *ceiling* of that life, not its *floor*.

The second problem is with the claim that every unsatisfied desire is painful. This is simply false as a description of human experience, and Epicurus knows it. The desire for a genuinely good thing — a journey you are planning, a friendship you are building, work you are pursuing — is not experienced primarily as painful. It is experienced as the anticipation of something real, which is itself pleasurable. The ache of genuine desire is often inseparable from the pleasure of its pursuit. A person who loves music and is looking forward to a concert is not suffering from an unsatisfied desire for music. They are enjoying the approach to a genuine good. Eliminating that desire would not reduce their suffering. It would eliminate a source of pleasure.

The third and most fundamental problem is this: Epicurus does not say that desire is the instrument of suffering. He says desire is the instrument nature gave us to identify and pursue genuine goods. The faculty that makes you hungry is not your enemy — it is your guide to nourishment. The faculty that makes you want genuine friendship is not a source of suffering — it is pointing you toward one of the greatest goods available to a human life. A philosophy that teaches you to silence these signals, in order to avoid the discomfort of wanting what you don't

yet have, is not protecting you from pain. It is severing your connection to the very faculties that make a full life possible.

What Epicurus actually cuts — in his careful classification of desires — are the ones that have no natural limit and no genuine payoff: the craving for unlimited wealth, the hunger for fame, the lust for power over others. These he cuts not because desire as such is dangerous, but because *these particular desires* generate more pain than pleasure. They have no stopping point at which satisfaction arrives. They feed on themselves. The cutting is a precise cost-benefit judgment about specific desires, not a war on wanting.

This distinction — cut the empty desires, pursue the genuine ones — is not a small textual nuance. It is the entire difference between a philosophy aimed at *more pleasure* and one aimed at *less desire*. These are opposite projects. The first says: identify what genuinely satisfies, cut what doesn't, and pursue what does with full engagement. The second says: reduce your wants until your circumstances can satisfy them all without effort. The first produces the full cup. The second produces the philosophical equivalent of an empty stomach, dressed up as wisdom.

Now — it is worth noting that the logic of "every unsatisfied desire is painful, therefore eliminate desire" has been followed seriously, to its genuine conclusion, by traditions that were at least honest enough to name what they were doing. Buddhism, in particular, builds an entire philosophical system on precisely this foundation. The First Noble Truth is that life involves suffering; the Second is that suffering arises from craving and attachment; the remedy is the progressive extinction of craving toward a state — nirvana, literally the blowing-out of a flame — in which desire no longer disturbs the mind.

This is a serious philosophy. It deserves to be engaged seriously. But it is a philosophy that Epicurus explicitly and repeatedly rejected. He was not trying to blow out the flame of desire. He was trying to direct it toward what actually burns bright and true. The "enough" reading of Epicurus has smuggled in the Buddhist diagnostic — desire as the source of suffering — while keeping the Epicurean label. *If its advocates stated their premise plainly* — "we hold that desire is the source of suffering, and that the Epicurean project is the progressive reduction of wanting toward a state of undisturbed calm" — the position would be

immediately recognizable for what it is, and the Epicurean objection would be immediate.

Instead, the premise stays buried. The Epicurean vocabulary stays in place. And the result is a philosophy that tells its adherents, in Epicurus's name, to want less, expect less, and find contentment in the gap between what they have and what they might have claimed.

That is not a small error. It is the substitution of one philosophy for another at the level of first principles — and it is being sold as the authentic Epicurean teaching.

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## Sayings That Get Weaponized Against the Philosophy

There is a genuine Epicurean saying — Vatican Saying 25 — that the "enough" interpretation leans on heavily: "Poverty, when measured by the natural goal of life, is great wealth, and unlimited wealth is great poverty."[3]

This is a real saying of Epicurus. It makes a real point. And it is almost universally misapplied.

The saying is addressed to a specific pathology: the person in the grip of *empty* desire, who has convinced himself that his happiness depends on accumulating wealth beyond any natural limit, and who therefore suffers regardless of how much he has, because the desire he is feeding has no natural stopping point. For that person — and there are many such people — the saying delivers a genuine correction. Stop chasing the unlimited. Recognize that what nature actually requires for genuine happiness is accessible, finite, and largely within your reach. Measure your wealth against what the good life actually costs, not against the bottomless appetite of social competition or status anxiety.

That correction is valid and important. But it is a correction of *excess*, addressed to people in the grip of desires that are generating more pain than pleasure. It is not a general license to accept whatever level of pleasure your current circumstances happen to deliver.

A second saying gets pressed into similar service: Vatican Saying 35.[4] In DeWitt's translation it reads: "We must not spoil the enjoyment of the blessings we have by pining for those we have not, but rather reflect that these too are among the things desirable." Bailey renders it: "We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune."[5]

On the surface this looks like a clear endorsement of contentment with what you already possess. But read it carefully. The saying does not say: *what you have is enough, and you should stop there*. It says: do not *spoil* what you have by pining for what you lack. The target of the saying is a specific error — the person who is already in possession of genuine goods but who undermines their enjoyment of those goods through envy, comparison, or restless dissatisfaction with their particular form. This is a psychological counsel about how to enjoy what you have *while* you have it — not a philosophical ruling that you should stop pursuing more.

The person on a genuinely good path toward filling their cup should absolutely apply this saying to their situation: do not let the pleasures you are currently enjoying be degraded by anxious comparison with pleasures not yet attained. But the saying offers no comfort to the person who has settled for a half-full cup and called it wisdom. It says nothing about whether they should have aimed higher in the first place. That question is answered by Vatican Saying 63 — and the answer is that frugality too has a limit, and disregarding that limit is the same error as excess.[6]

The saying that the "enough" interpretation consistently does *not* quote is Vatican Saying 63:[7]

**"Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is in like case with him who errs through excess."**[8]

Read that carefully. Epicurus is not warning only against wanting too much. He is warning equally against wanting too little. Frugality has a limit. Push past that limit — whether through excessive desire on one side or through insufficient engagement with life's genuine goods on the other — and you have committed the same category of error. The person who has trained himself into contentment

with a half-full cup, when a full cup was available to him, has not achieved Epicurean wisdom. He has achieved a different kind of philosophical failure.

This saying appears in the Vatican collection. It is genuinely Epicurean. It is almost never quoted in popular presentations of Epicurean philosophy. The reason is not hard to identify.

One further saying circulates widely on the internet, attributed to Epicurus everywhere from quote aggregators to philosophy podcasts: *"Nothing is enough for the man to whom enough is too little."* In Bailey's translation it is Vatican Saying 68: "Nothing is sufficient for him to whom what is sufficient seems little."[9] It is worth examining honestly, because it is frequently cited in support of the "enough" reading — and because it actually argues against it.

This is Vatican Saying 68 — genuine Epicurus, preserved in the Vatican manuscript collection.[10] The literal rendering is "To whom a little is not sufficient, nothing is sufficient." And it is a diagnosis of a pathology, not a counsel of contentment.

The saying is a diagnosis of a pathology, not a counsel of contentment. It identifies the person for whom no amount of accumulation ever registers as sufficient — the man whose appetite has become so disordered that the concept of "enough" has lost all meaning for him. For that man, more wealth, more power, more fame will never satisfy, because his problem is not a deficit of goods but a corruption of the faculty that would allow him to recognize satisfaction when it arrives. The saying is a warning about empty desire — precisely the category Epicurus cuts in the *Letter to Menoeceus*.

It is emphatically not a warning against wanting a full cup. The person who is pressing honestly toward their own full cup — who has applied reason to identify what genuinely satisfies, who is pursuing genuine goods with appropriate energy, who would recognize the full cup if they reached it — is not the person this saying addresses. That person's "enough" is not too little. It is exactly calibrated to what nature and reason together have identified as the genuine goal. The saying attacks the unlimited desire that can never find its limit, not the legitimate desire that knows where its limit is and presses toward it.

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## What Gets Cut — and What Doesn't

The popular presentation of Epicurus as a philosopher of minimal desire gets its apparent textual support from the three-category classification of desires laid out in the *Letter to Menoeceus*: desires that are natural and necessary, desires that are natural but unnecessary, and desires that are neither natural nor necessary (the "empty" desires). The advice is to satisfy the natural and necessary desires, to engage with the natural but unnecessary desires when the cost is low and the pleasure genuine, and to cut out the empty desires altogether.

This is accurate as far as it goes. But the popular version stops after "cut the empty desires" and presents that cutting as the whole of the Epicurean project. It is not.

What Epicurus actually says in that same letter is that the goal is *a blessed life* — a life in which pleasures predominate, in which the body is free from pain and the mind free from disturbance, in which genuine goods are actively pursued and genuinely obtained. The cutting of empty desires is the *clearing work* — the removal of the obstacles that were preventing full engagement with real goods. It is not the destination. It is the preparation for the destination.

Imagine a person who has been eating spoiled food and suffering for it. The correct advice is to stop eating spoiled food. But "stop eating spoiled food" is not a complete nutritional philosophy. It is a prerequisite for the actual goal, which is nourishment. The person who stops eating spoiled food and then concludes that the lesson of nutrition is to eat as little as possible has missed the point entirely.

The empty desires that Epicurus cuts are the spoiled food: the insatiable hunger for wealth beyond all natural measure, the lust for power for its own sake, the craving for fame and public recognition, the desire to dominate others. Cut those, and what remains is not a stripped-down minimalist life. What remains is the full range of genuine human pleasures — friendship, understanding, the pleasures of body enjoyed with wisdom, beauty, adventure, the satisfaction of work done well, the security that comes from genuine community — available to be lived as fully as circumstances allow.

The goal is not the empty stomach. The goal is the full cup.

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## You Only Live Once — And Epicurus Knew It

The urgency is not a modern addition to Epicurean philosophy. It is baked into the most fundamental claims of the system, and it is the element that the "contentment" reading most completely suppresses.

Vatican Saying 14 should be carved over the door of every philosophy department in the world:[11]

**"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 without allowing himself leisure."**[12]

This is not a gentle philosophical observation. This is a charge. It is directed at the person who is waiting — waiting for the right circumstances, the right moment, the right level of preparation — before claiming their happiness. Epicurus is telling that person: there is no second chance. Every moment of unnecessary unhappiness, every year spent pursuing empty goods or avoiding genuine ones, every day wasted in the fog of groundless fears or false obligations — that is time permanently gone. Not banked somewhere for a later withdrawal. Gone.

This urgency is the direct consequence of the Epicurean position on death and the soul. There is no afterlife in which to make up for a wasted life here. There is no divine reward for having suffered virtuously through this one. There is no reincarnation, no second chance, no compensatory eternity. You have this life. It is finite. Its natural goal is pleasure, and the time to pursue that goal is the time you have — which is not unlimited.

A philosophy that responds to this reality by saying "you already have enough, just appreciate what you have" is not being humble or wise. It is wasting the only life its adherents will ever have.

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## The Asymmetry: Where the Real Problem Lies

Epicurus's warnings about excessive desire were written for a specific population in a specific context. In the ancient world, the ruling temptations for educated people with means were the ones Epicurus addressed: the hunger for wealth, power, political glory, social status. These were genuine problems — many of the men Epicurus was writing for were the ones who might plausibly be destroyed by ambition, by the craving for more than they could use, by the pursuit of goods that could not, by their nature, deliver the happiness promised.

In the modern world, something has shifted. The population most in need of Epicurean philosophy is not primarily composed of overreachers. It is composed of people who have never seriously asked what they actually want from life, people who have allowed their circumstances, their cultural inheritance, and their unexamined fears to arrange their days for them, people who have never pressed on the question of whether the life they are living is actually generating the pleasure that life is capable of generating.

For these people — and they are the majority of people who come to Epicurean philosophy looking for something — the counsel to want less is actively harmful. They do not need to cut their desires. They need to discover them. They need to recognize that the natural goods — genuine friendship, meaningful work, the pleasures of the body, the understanding of nature, the freedom from groundless fear — are not luxuries available only to the fortunate but claims that every human being is entitled to press. They need to understand that the half-lived life, the life of comfortable numbness, the life of managed expectations and careful contentment, is not what Epicurus was offering.

Vatican Saying 63 is the corrective precisely here.[13] The person who has reduced their frugality to a principle, who has trained themselves to want less and accept more, who takes philosophical pride in needing nothing and expecting nothing — that person has missed the limit of frugality. They have gone past the point where cutting empty desires clears the way for genuine pleasure and into the territory where cutting genuine desire produces genuine deprivation.

The pathology of over-desire is real. But in a culture saturated with the message that satisfaction is dangerous, that ambition is suspect, that wanting more than the minimum is greed or vanity — the opposite pathology is at least as common, and Epicurean philosophy, properly understood, has as much to say about it.

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## The Full Cup Is the Goal — Not the Philosophical Achievement of Needing Less

Principal Doctrine 3 is frequently cited as evidence for the "enough" interpretation:[14]

*"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."*[15]

This is taken to mean: the goal is simply the absence of pain. Once pain is gone, you have arrived. There is nothing further to pursue.

This is a misreading, and not a subtle one. The Doctrine is making a precise point about the *limit* of pleasure — the ceiling, the point of maximum achievement — in response to the Platonic objection that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it is unlimited and therefore never fully achieved. Epicurus answers: pleasure is not unlimited. It has a natural limit, which is the full removal of pain. At that point, the cup is full.

But notice what the doctrine presupposes: it presupposes that the cup needs to be filled to that limit. The goal is not to survive on a fraction of what the cup can hold. The goal is to fill the cup. Principal Doctrine 3 describes the *destination* — the full cup — not a rationale for accepting a half-full one.[16]

The mistake of the "enough" reading is to take the description of the ceiling and convert it into permission to stop at the floor. If the removal of pain is the limit of pleasure, and if your current contentment involves some residual pain — some unfulfilled natural desire, some genuine good that could be yours but that you have trained yourself not to want — then you have not arrived at the limit. You have settled before reaching it. And Vatican Saying 63 says explicitly that settling before the limit is the same category of error as exceeding it.[17]

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## What Genuine Epicurean Ambition Looks Like

The picture of the authentic Epicurean is not a man sitting cross-legged in a garden, having reduced his needs to a philosophical minimum and achieved equanimity. It is a man living at full engagement — intellectually, socially, physically — with everything the philosophy provides as his guide and his foundation.

Epicurus himself was not a philosopher of withdrawal. He wrote prolifically, built a community, maintained an international correspondence, trained students relentlessly, and pressed his philosophical claims with a combativeness that his enemies found alarming. The Epicurean Garden was not a retreat from the world but a base of operations within it.

The ancient Epicureans who best exemplify the philosophy in practice were not quiet contemplatives. Cassius Longinus, the most prominent Epicurean in the Roman political world, grounded his decision to act against Caesar in his Epicurean convictions. The inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda — carved on a public wall to spread the message of the philosophy to the widest possible audience — was an act of philosophical ambition on a scale most philosophers in any tradition never attempted.

What animates these figures is not contentment with what they had. It is the recognition that genuine goods are worth pursuing vigorously, that the conditions for a full Epicurean life — including political freedom, genuine community, and the spread of the philosophy itself — are worth working for, and that the philosophy's claim that you have one life is a reason to fill it, not to reduce your profile within it.

Vatican Saying 41 — the one Epicurus meant as a charge to his community — says it directly: "we must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."[18] This is not a description of a man who has made his peace with having enough. It is a description of a man who is fully in the world, pressing every genuine good available to him, and doing so with the urgency of someone who knows the clock is running.

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## The Fire Under Everything

Lucretius, the greatest poet of Epicurean philosophy, did not write the urgency of the philosophy as a gentle suggestion. He wrote it as a fire.

His treatment of the fear of death in Book III of *De Rerum Natura* is famously passionate — an argument not merely for accepting death but for *living in consequence of* what understanding death actually means. The point of understanding that death is nothing to fear is not to achieve a calm philosophical composure about it. The point is to stop letting the fear of death steal the life you have. Lucretius describes people who rush into meaningless activity, who pile ambition on ambition, who flee themselves through constant motion — not because they love what they're doing but because they are running from the confrontation with their own mortality that a genuinely Epicurean life would require.

The person who uses Epicurean philosophy to achieve comfortable philosophical distance from that confrontation — who nods at the one-life claim and then returns to a carefully managed contentment — has not understood the argument. The argument does not lead to contentment. It leads to the recognition that every year spent in the fog of false beliefs and insufficient pleasure is a year gone, and that the only rational response to that recognition is to live *now*, fully, with every genuine good you can secure.

This is why the "settle for what you have" reading is not just philosophically wrong. It is, from the perspective of what Epicurus actually demonstrated, almost the opposite of what the philosophy produces in someone who genuinely receives it. The person who has genuinely received the Epicurean understanding of mortality does not become content with less. They become the person who cannot tolerate the waste of a single year on false goods, who presses on every genuine good available to them with the focus of someone who knows the time is not unlimited, who treats their one life with the seriousness it deserves rather than the comfortable carelessness of someone who still, underneath the philosophical vocabulary, believes there will be more time.

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## H.G. Wells and the Partisans of Enough

In 1936, the novelist and social thinker H.G. Wells did something unusual: he wrote the screenplay for a science fiction film himself, from beginning to end, insisting on full creative control over the result. The film was *Things to Come*, directed by William Cameron Menzies and starring Raymond Massey. Wells had complete artistic authority over the production — he was not adapting his own work so much as using the film medium to deliver a philosophical argument directly, in his own words, to the widest possible audience.

The argument he delivered in the film's closing scene is one that should resonate immediately with anyone who has thought carefully about the Epicurean case against the gospel of enough.

The scene: the future. A gleaming technological civilization has been built after centuries of war and collapse. A space gun has been constructed — the first crewed mission to the moon is about to launch. A mob, incited by a sculptor named Theotocopulos who has declared that "progress is not living" and that the people have been enslaved to scientific advance, moves to destroy the space gun before it can fire. The leader of civilization, Oswald Cabal, gets the launch off just ahead of the mob.

Then — as the capsule disappears into the night sky — Cabal, whose daughter was on the capsule, faces the anxious father of the young man who also chose to make the journey. The father is not a villain. He is a recognizable type: a decent man, genuinely concerned for human welfare, who believes the right philosophical lesson is to be content, to rest, to stop pressing forward into the unknown when what we already have is sufficient. He voices the partisans of enough in their most sympathetic form. His son chose to risk his life to go to the moon. He cannot understand why.

*"Oh God,"* he asks, *"is there ever to be any age of happiness? Is there never to be any rest?"*[19]

Cabal's answer is worth quoting in full, because Wells wrote it, chose it, and put it at the end of his film for a reason:

*"Rest enough for the individual man — too much, and too soon — and we call it death. But for Man, no rest and no ending. He must go on — conquest beyond conquest. First, this little planet and its winds and ways, and then all the laws of mind and matter that restrain him. Then the planets about him, and at last out across immensity to the stars. And when he has conquered all the deeps of space and all the mysteries of time, still he will be beginning."*[20]

Then, as the father protests that humanity is made of "little animals" — fragile, weak, creatures that need their rest — Cabal turns the framing against itself:

*"Little animals. And if we're no more than animals, we must snatch each little scrap of happiness, and live, and suffer, and pass, mattering no more than all the other animals do or have done. It is this, or that. All the universe or nothing. Which shall it be, Passworthy? Which shall it be?"*[21]

Now — note carefully what Wells has done here, and why it matters for this discussion.

The film is not, at its core, about collective human destiny in the abstract. The young people who insist on making the journey to the moon are not sacrificing themselves for humanity. They want to go. They want it badly enough to accept the genuine possibility of dying in the attempt. The father who wrings his hands is not arguing against their safety — they have already accepted the risk. He is arguing against their *desire*. He is telling them that the right relationship to such desires is to moderate them, to be satisfied with what is already at hand, to find peace in what civilization has already provided.

And the young people have answered him already, before the launch, by getting into the capsule.

Cabal's closing speech does not celebrate abstract collective progress as a substitute for individual happiness. It identifies the real choice: either you take the "little animals" framing — we are small creatures who should want little and be grateful for scraps — or you take the other position, which is that the range of what a human life can reach for is effectively unbounded, and that the one-life reality is a reason to reach, not a reason to stop.

This is the Epicurean argument, and regardless of what Wells himself may have had in mind it is not idealist or collectivist. Epicurus had no interest in civiliza-

tional conquest for its own sake, but he was vitally interested in the underlying tension: the partisans of enough are, consciously or not, choosing the scrap-snatching life. They are telling you that the little animals framing is the wise one. And Epicurus, twenty-four centuries before Wells, gave the same answer Cabal gives: you have one life, its goal is the fullest possible pleasure, and the time to claim that life is now.

One phrase in Cabal's speech deserves particular attention, because it could be misread in a direction that is not Epicurean: *"mattering no more than all the other animals do or have done."*[22] On the surface this sounds like an appeal to significance — to cosmic importance, to legacy, to the idea that a human life should count for something in some larger register. That framing belongs to Stoicism and to the religious traditions that share its structure, not to Epicurus. Epicurus does not say: live fully because your life will thereby have significance. He says: live fully because the fullest possible pleasure is the natural goal of your one life, and no one is coming to give you a second one.

But here is where the Epicurean and the Wells language converge on the same truth: what we call "mattering" — the sense that a life has been genuinely lived, that its goods were real, that its pleasures were full and not managed down to a defensive minimum — that sense *is itself* a form of pleasure. It is what the full cup feels like from the inside. The Epicurean who has lived fully does not "matter" in some abstract cosmic register while remaining separately indifferent to pleasure. The sense of having lived well *is* the pleasure. Meaningfulness is not a category above pleasure that you reach by accumulating enough of the latter. All meaningfulness is pleasure, experienced as the genuine satisfaction of a life that has not settled for less than it could reach.

Read in that light, Cabal's "mattering" language is pointing at something truly Epicurean. The scrap-snatching life — the life of the "little animals" who need their rest, who moderate their desires until circumstances can satisfy them without effort — is not merely a life of less cosmic significance. It is a life of less pleasure. Cramped, narrow, defensive against the genuine goods that a full life requires. The alternative is not importance for its own sake. It is the full cup, and the full cup is what "mattering" actually feels like when it is honestly achieved.

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## Conclusion: Fill the Cup

The "enough" reading of Epicurus is not without its textual hooks. The sayings about reducing unnecessary desire, about poverty measured against nature's standards being great wealth, about the philosopher's ability to be happy on a crust of cheese — these are real. They make real points. They are addressed to real pathologies.

But they are not the whole of the philosophy, and they are not its animating center. The animating center is the claim that nature has given you, from birth, a faculty that tells you what the good is — pleasure — and a faculty that tells you what is harmful — pain — and that a life organized around the honest use of those faculties, with reason and wisdom as tools, will produce more genuine happiness than any alternative framework yet devised.

The cup has a natural limit. That limit is full, not half-full. The philosophy's project is to fill it — by removing what generates unnecessary pain, yes, but equally by pursuing what generates genuine pleasure with the intelligence and vigor that the one-life reality demands. This is not an anti-intellectual philosophy. It is the most demanding philosophy available — because it requires not only logical consistency but constant verification against what sensation actually reports about your own life. A philosophy built on a premise that fails that test, however logical its superstructure, is not Epicurean. It is rationalism dressed in Epicurean vocabulary.

Vatican Saying 63 says that frugality has a limit, and that disregarding it is the same error as excess.[23] The philosophy of "you already have enough if you would just appreciate it" has been disregarding that limit for decades. It has been offering people a reduced version of the philosophy and calling it wisdom. It has been treating the one life they have as an occasion for philosophical contentment rather than for the fullest possible engagement with every genuine good available to them.

The young people in Wells's film got into the capsule because they wanted to. The pleasure of the journey — the reach, the risk, the genuine engagement with something they judged to be worth doing — was worth more to them than the

safety of the ground. That is not recklessness. That is the recognition, which Epicurus spent his life pressing on everyone who would listen, that the alternative to filling the cup is not philosophical wisdom. It is just a smaller life.

That is not Epicurus. That is the comfortable corruption of a philosophy that was, from its first word to its last, built on the recognition that the time is now, the life is one, and the goal is full.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Stiff Upper Lip? Wrong Philosopher: How Epicurus Became the Patron Saint of Graceful Decline — And Why He Would Have Hated That

Picture the Epicurean philosopher as popular culture has rendered him. He is old, or at least elderly in spirit. He sits quietly — in a garden, perhaps, or by a window as the light fades. He has learned, through long experience and patient reflection, to want less. To expect less. To find contentment in small things: a cup of something warm, the company of a faithful friend, the dimming beauty of a sunset that he watches without grasping for more. He has made his peace with pain. He has come to accept that the world does not arrange itself for our convenience, that time takes what it will, that the wise course is to bear our lot with dignity, to keep calm, to carry on.

He is, in other words, a perfect Stoic.

Which is unfortunate, because Epicurus despised Stoicism.

The portrait described above — the philosopher of graceful decline, the patron saint of decrepit old men, nursing homes and hospice care, the ancient Greek progenitor of the stiff upper lip — is one of the most successful cases of philosophical identity theft in the history of ideas. Someone has stolen Epicurus's name, dressed it in Stoic clothing, and sent it out into the world to teach precisely the philosophy that Epicurus spent his life opposing. The real Epicurus — the combative, free-will-defending, fate-mocking, determinism-loathing philosopher who built a community of engagement rather than a school of endurance — would not recognize himself in the portrait. He would, however, recognize

the tradition that produced it. He was aware of what Zeno was teaching and he kew what Stoicism looked like. He rejected it.

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## The Misreading in Its Most Recognizable Form

The "acceptance" reading of Epicurus appears in its most concentrated form in popular treatments of the Tetrapharmakon — the four-line "summary" of Epicurean philosophy that circulates everywhere from introductory textbooks to philosophy podcasts. The four claims are: don't fear god, don't fear death, what is good is easy to get, what is terrible is easy to endure.

That last line is false to Epicurus and is doing enormous damage. "What is terrible is easy to endure" reads, to a modern ear, as a counsel of endurance — a philosophical instruction to bear suffering with equanimity. And it is from this reading that the entire "grin and bear it" interpretation flows. Epicurus becomes, on this account, a philosopher of therapeutic endurance: someone who helps you make peace with the difficulties that cannot be avoided, who teaches you to bear pain without being destroyed by it, who prepares you for decline and death by showing you that these things are, ultimately, manageable. And worse, that the only real value in pleasure is its use as a soothing balm for pain, which after being extinguished means pleasure has no use whatsoever.

This reading misses everything that matters.

The Tetrapharmakon, even taken at face value — which it should not be — does not say "what is terrible is easy to endure" as if the program were to endure it. It says what is terrible is *easy to endure* because what is genuinely terrible — understood correctly, with the fear of divine punishment and the terror of death removed — is far less terrible than most people suppose. The point is not "bear it with dignity." The point is "it is not as bad as you think, and you have been frightened by phantoms." The four lines are a program for removing fear, not for cultivating endurance. The target is not pain but the false beliefs that magnify pain beyond its actual content.

But the Tetrapharmakon misreading is only the first layer of the corruption. It generates a second, even more damaging error: the claim that pleasure itself is

nothing more than a soothing balm for pain — and that once pain is gone, pleasure has no further role to play.

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## Pleasure as Balm — The Reductionist Trap

The "soothing balm" reading of Epicurean pleasure needs its own examination, because it is not merely an incidental misreading. It is a second layer of the same corruption, and it has consequences that are just as damaging as the "grin and bear it" interpretation.

The argument runs like this: Epicurus says pain is the great evil. Pleasure, on this account, exists primarily as the antidote — the medicine that soothes pain and restores equilibrium. Once pain has been removed, pleasure has done its job. The goal state is simply the *absence* of pain, a kind of neutral zero — undisturbed, calm, flat. And since pain has been removed, there is nothing left for pleasure to do. You have arrived. You sit in your undisturbed calm and wait.

This reading has a certain textual foothold. Epicurus does say that the removal of pain is the limit of pleasure — Principal Doctrine 3 is explicit on this.[1] And so the reductionist concludes: pleasure is a therapeutic tool, pain-removal is the goal, and the ideal Epicurean life is one in which the patient has finally been cured and no longer requires treatment.

The reductionist also has a more specific passage to work with, and it calls for a direct answer because it is the sharpest textual weapon in their arsenal. In section 128 of the *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus writes:

*"For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; but when we do not feel pain, we no longer need pleasure."*[2]

There it is in black and white, or so the argument goes: when pain is absent, pleasure is no longer needed. Pleasure is the medicine; once the illness is cured, put the medicine away. The ideal state — pain absent, pleasure no longer required — is a kind of philosophical contentment, a resting point, a condition of undisturbed calm in which the active pursuit of further goods has become unnecessary. The patient is cured. The work is done.

This reading collapses under the weight of the very sentence that surrounds it.

Look at what Epicurus says immediately before the passage: the living creature, once free from pain and fear, "has not to wander as though in search of something that is missing, and to look for some other thing by which he can fulfill the good of the soul and the good of the body."[3] The wandering, anxious, searching creature — the one who does not yet have what it needs — is the one in pain. Once genuine pleasure is achieved, the anxious search stops. Not because pleasure disappears. Because the creature is no longer lacking it.

The phrase "we no longer need pleasure" means precisely this: we are no longer in a state of painful deficiency that requires remedy.[4] We already *have* the pleasure. The cup is full. You do not "need" to fill a full cup — not because fullness is irrelevant, but because the work of filling has been completed. More precisely: you have no further need for *additional* pleasure because you already have all the pleasure the cup can hold. That is not the absence of pleasure. That is pleasure at its maximum — which is exactly what Principal Doctrine 3 says the limit of pleasure is.[5] The limit is full, not empty. What you do with a full cup is *enjoy* it — vary its contents, savor its present goods, share it with friends, use the security it provides to engage more fully with everything genuine that life offers.

This is confirmed by the very same letter, only a few lines earlier, where Epicurus describes what the blessed life actually contains: it includes the pleasures of the table and of love, philosophical conversation, friendship, beauty — goods that a person already free from pain is actively enjoying, not passively awaiting. These are not described as medicines administered to the sick. They are the contents of the full cup, enjoyed by someone who has the wisdom to fill it and keep it full.

The confusion arises from treating "need" as if it referred to the enjoyment of pleasure rather than the anxious pursuit of it under conditions of deficit. When you are hungry, you need food. When you are no longer hungry — when you have eaten well — you do not "need" food in that anxious, pressing sense. But this does not mean food is irrelevant to your life, that you will never eat again, or that the pleasures of a fine meal have ceased to be genuine goods. It means you are no longer in the painful state that made the need urgent. The pleasure of eating well remains real. You are simply not suffering its absence at this moment.

Epicurus is describing the difference between the pleasure-seeking of someone in pain — driven, anxious, restless — and the pleasure-experiencing of someone whose life is genuinely full. The first is a creature wandering in search of what it lacks. The second is a creature living in possession of what it has built. The *Letter to Menoeceus* describes both states clearly, and it is unmistakably the second that Epicurus is recommending. Pleasure is its beginning and its end — not its medicine and its discharge.

There is a deeper error still in the balm reading. It implicitly concedes the Stoic premise — that pleasure is not a genuine primary good but a secondary comfort, something we reach for when things go wrong. On this picture, the person who has successfully removed all pain has no further use for pleasure, just as the healthy patient has no further use for medicine. And from that it follows that the highest Epicurean achievement is a kind of pleasant numbness — undisturbed, calm, beyond the reach of genuine desire. This is not the Epicurean goal. It is a Stoic goal wearing an Epicurean mask.

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## How Epicureans Actually Lived — And That Was Not This

Both of these misreadings — the grin-and-bear-it Tetrapharmakon and the pleasure-as-medicine reduction — share a common practical implication: they produce a passive philosopher, one who endures, accepts, and waits. The ancient Epicureans were none of these things.

Cassius Longinus, the most prominent Epicurean in Roman political life, was confronted with a situation in which the fate that the Stoic philosopher would counsel accepting — the consolidation of Caesar's power, the end of the Republic, the arrangement of the world in a form uncongenial to his values — was presented to him as an accomplished fact. His response was not acceptance. He did not compose himself to endure his altered circumstances with philosophical dignity. He organized a group of liberators, recruited Brutus, and acted. His Epicurean philosophy did not counsel him to make peace with what he could not change. It told him that the conditions of a genuinely good life were worth fighting to secure, and that a man of philosophical conviction did not simply submit to the arrangement of affairs that fortune had delivered.

Diogenes of Oinoanda did not respond to the prevalence of philosophical error in the world by accepting it as one of those ineradicable features of human existence that the wise man learns to tolerate. He had a wall built — a large one, in a public place — and had the Epicurean philosophy carved on it in full, so that as many people as possible could read it and be helped by it. This is not the behavior of a man who timidly accepted the world as he found it.

Epicurus himself — the quiet gardener of popular imagination — wrote prolifically, taught doggedly, maintained an extensive international correspondence, built a community from scratch, and argued with fierce specificity against every philosophical tradition he considered wrong. The *Letter to Herodotus*, the *Letter to Menoeceus*, the *Principal Doctrines* — these are not the works of a man who has settled into philosophical acceptance of the world's terms. They are the works of a man who believed he had found the truth, that the correction of error was possible, and that the difference between true and false mattered enough to spend a lifetime making the case.

None of this looks like "stay calm and carry on." It looks like what it was: a philosophy of active, reasoned, vigorous engagement with the one life available.

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## The Stiff Upper Lip Belongs to Zeno

Let us be precise about where the "grin and bear it" philosophy actually comes from, because it matters to name the tradition correctly.

The Stoic philosophical framework — and this was required for the sake of internal consistency — is built on the premise that virtue is the only genuine good and that everything else, including health, wealth, friendship, pleasure, and freedom from pain, falls into the category of "indifferents": things that are preferred or dispreferred but that have no genuine bearing on the quality of a life. From this premise the Stoic program of endurance follows with perfect logical consistency. If pleasure is not genuinely good and pain is not genuinely bad, then the philosopher who has internalized this can face pain, decline, loss, and death with genuine equanimity — not because they are suppressing their feelings, but because they have genuinely revalued the external world as incapable of touching

what matters. The Stoic sage is invulnerable to fortune because he has placed his good somewhere fortune cannot reach.

This is a serious philosophical position. Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca all pursued versions of it. When you see the phrase "this too shall pass" stitched on a pillow, or "amor fati" tattooed on someone's forearm, or a philosophy podcast explaining how to be at peace with the things you cannot control — that is Stoicism. That is what Stoicism is for. It is a philosophy of acceptance grounded on seeing the present as intelligently designed by a higher force, and it does not pretend otherwise.

Epicurus built his philosophy in deliberate opposition to this framework. Pleasure, he said, is genuinely good — the most fundamental good, the one that nature itself has provided as the standard for evaluating everything else. Pain is genuinely bad. Health matters. Friendship matters. Freedom from anxiety matters — not as a Stoic "preferred indifferent" but as a genuine component of the good life. The external world is not a morally neutral backdrop against which the sage performs his virtue. It is the arena in which genuine goods are found or not found, pursued or missed, won or lost.

This means that the Epicurean cannot be genuinely indifferent to fortune in the Stoic sense. He has something real to lose. He has genuine goods that pain and decline and loss can take from him. And the Epicurean response to that vulnerability is not to revalue those goods away — not to say, with Zeno, that pleasure was never genuinely good, so losing it cannot genuinely harm you. The Epicurean response is to arrange your life as intelligently as possible to maximize the genuine goods available to you and minimize the genuine pains, for as long as you live.

The pursuit is active, ongoing, and aimed at actual results. It is the opposite of acceptance.

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## The Theatre Exit — And What It Actually Means

There is a saying about the wise Epicurean's relationship to life that the "acceptance" reading loves to deploy — and which, read carefully, means something almost exactly opposite to what they take it to mean.

The saying is reported by Torquatus, the Epicurean spokesman in Book One of Cicero's *On Ends* — which makes it one of the best-attested statements of Epicurean practical philosophy we possess, delivered by a knowledgeable defender of the school in a formal philosophical debate. Torquatus states that the wise man does not cling desperately to life, but rather, when the play no longer pleases him, he exits the theatre. The "acceptance" reading takes this as evidence that Epicurus counseled a kind of philosophical detachment from life — a readiness to let go, an absence of desperate clinging to continued existence that the Stoic framing would recognize as admirable equanimity.

But look at what the saying actually does. It does not say: the wise man endures a bad play to the end because that is what one does. It does not say: the wise man bears his theatrical experience with dignity regardless of the quality of the performance. It says: when the play no longer pleases him, he *leaves*. He makes a decision. He exercises agency. He does not submit to the experience — he evaluates it against the standard of pleasure and pain, finds it wanting, and acts accordingly.

This is the exercise of free will against circumstances, not acceptance of them. The image Epicurus chose is not the stoic audience member who sits through a terrible play with arms folded and chin raised. It is the man who gets up, makes his own assessment, and walks out.

And then there is the companion principle that the same tradition never quotes: *it is a very small man who has many reasons to end his own life.* This saying exists as the necessary counterbalance. The theatre exit is not a counsel of despair or a philosophical license to abandon a difficult life. It is the brave option available in extremis — the recognition that a life can reach a point where the genuine goods are so severely diminished and the genuine pains so unavoidable that the calculation tilts unmistakably. But the word "small" is doing important work. The man

who reaches for that exit frequently, for ordinary reasons, under ordinary pressures — that man has failed to live the Epicurean life. The exit is not a coping strategy. It is the final exercise of the same agency that the Epicurean applies to every other decision: honest assessment, followed by reasoned action.

Both sayings together describe the same philosopher: someone who takes his own life into his own hands, who evaluates his situation against the standard of genuine pleasure and pain, and who acts accordingly — whether that means leaving the theatre or staying in it and working to improve the performance.

That is not acceptance. That is sovereignty.

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## Epicurus on Fate: The Fiercest Rejection in Ancient Philosophy

Now we arrive at the philosophical core — the reason why the "patron saint of acceptance" reading is not merely a mischaracterization but a reversal.

Epicurus's treatment of fate and determinism is one of the most distinctive and forceful elements of his entire philosophy. He did not merely say that fate should not frighten us. He said that hard determinism — the view that everything that happens is the inevitable product of prior causes, following laws that no individual can alter — is worse than superstition. He means this literally.

The *Letter to Menoeceus* contains one of the most arresting sentences in ancient philosophy: it would be better, Epicurus says, to give in to the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the fate of the natural philosophers. Better to prostrate yourself before Zeus — unpredictable, potentially placatable, at least responsive to prayer and ritual — than to believe in a universe of iron necessity from which no prayer, no action, and no human choice can deviate by a single degree.

Why? Because Zeus can be reasoned with. Zeus has moods, preferences, the possibility of mercy. A person facing Zeus is at least in a relationship with an agent — something that can respond, that might be moved, that does not simply execute its programming regardless of what any human being thinks or wants or does. Hard determinism offers nothing. If everything that happens is fixed by prior causes running back before your birth, then the very thought you are hav-

ing right now was determined before the first atom assembled itself into the first living thing. Your choices are not choices. Your life is not yours. You are, in Epicurus's formulation, a slave — not to any master you can address or oppose, but to necessity itself, which is the most totalizing form of slavery imaginable.

This is why the philosophical move that Epicurus makes in introducing the atomic swerve — the uncaused slight deviation in the path of atoms that breaks the chain of mechanical necessity — is not a footnote to the physics. It is a major contributor to the ethical foundation. Without the swerve, there is no free will. Without free will, there is no genuine choice. Without genuine choice, the entire Epicurean project — of applying reason to identify genuine goods, of arranging one's life intelligently to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, of making the kind of life one wants to live — collapses. You cannot be the author of your own life if your life was written before you were born.

Epicurus needed the swerve, and he put it in the physics, because that is where it belongs: in the fundamental account of how nature works, before the ethics can be built on top of it.

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## The Wise Man Laughs at Fate

The phrase "the wise man laughs at fate" is not a bumper sticker. It is a summary of the practical consequence of taking the Epicurean account of freedom seriously.

The philosopher who has genuinely understood that the universe is not determined — that the atoms swerve, that the mind has genuine agency, that the future is open rather than fixed — does not face the future with Stoic endurance. He faces it with the confidence of someone who knows that his intelligence, his choices, and his reasoned engagement with his circumstances are real forces in the world, capable of producing real outcomes, and that the wise application of those forces will produce better results than submission to whatever fortune delivers.

This is not the arrogance of someone who believes he can control everything. The Epicurean is not a Promethean figure raging against limits that cannot be

moved. He knows that his circumstances are finite, that his body is mortal, that some losses are genuinely irreversible. But between the extremes of total control and total submission lies the enormous territory of a human life, in which the choices one makes, the relationships one builds, the community one belongs to, the habits one cultivates, and the philosophy one applies — all of these make genuine differences to the quality and quantity of pleasure experienced.

The Stoic accepts fate because fate is what it is, and the sage's virtue does not depend on it. The Epicurean manages fate because fate is not fixed, and his pleasure depends on doing so wisely.

The laugh at fate is not contempt for the universe. It is the recognition that the universe, properly understood — as open, as undetermined, as genuinely responsive to human intelligence applied to the problem of living well — is an invitation rather than a sentence.

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## Conclusion: Return the Label of Nursing Home Philosopher to Its Rightful Owner

Epicurus does not belong in the nursing home. He does not belong on the sympathy card, in the hospice waiting room, or in the self-help section under "learning to let go." He belongs in the philosophy that he actually built: a vigorous, combative, free-will-grounded account of how a human being can take hold of the one life available to them and fill it as completely as reason and circumstance allow.

The philosopher of acceptance — the one who counsels equanimity in the face of what cannot be changed, who teaches us to detach our wellbeing from external outcomes, who makes his peace with fortune by refusing to let fortune matter — that philosopher has a name. His name is Zeno. His followers included Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and every person who has ever taken comfort in the idea that the sage rises above his circumstances rather than engaging and working to overcome them. Zeno was the founder of Stoicism.

Epicurus's relationship to his circumstances was engagement, not transcendence. His answer to pain was not bearing it with dignity but removing its causes

where possible and understanding its actual content where not. His answer to fate was not acceptance but defiance — philosophical defiance, grounded in the claim that the universe is open, that choices matter, and that the wise man who laughs at fate does so because he knows something the fatalist does not: that the next moment is not written yet, and that what he does in this one is genuinely his to decide.

That is the philosopher whose name has been borrowed to decorate a philosophy of decline. It would be generous to call the confusion an honest mistake. It looks more like the kind of substitution that happens when a vital, challenging, demanding philosophy is made safe enough for the greeting card market by stripping out everything that made it vital.

Epicurus would like his name back.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Venus, Reason, and the Full Cup: The Epicurean Philosophy of Sex, Love, and Marriage

Lucretius does not begin *De Rerum Natura* with atoms. He begins with Venus.

The opening invocation of the greatest Epicurean philosophical poem in the Latin language is addressed to Venus — not as a supernatural deity who literally governs the cosmos, but as the poetic embodiment of the most primal force nature has placed in living creatures: the drive toward union, procreation, and the perpetuation of life itself. "Mother of Aeneas's sons, joy of men and gods, Venus the life-giver," Lucretius writes, "who beneath the gliding stars of heaven fillest with life the sea that carries the ships and the land that bears the crops; for thanks to thee every tribe of living things is conceived, and comes forth to look upon the light of the sun."[1]

This is not incidental decoration. Lucretius is establishing his theme with his very first words: the force that drives all living things toward one another, toward mating, toward the creation of new life, is one of the most fundamental expressions of nature itself. It is not a weakness. It is not a temptation. It is nature's own loudest call, built into the fabric of every creature that has ever lived, and it is the force without which life itself would cease.

Any account of Epicurean philosophy that presents sex and love and the desire for children as things to be moderated, disciplined, and kept at a philosophical arm's length has not merely misread Epicurus. It has gotten him exactly backward.

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## What Nature Built Into Us

The Epicurean account of nature is not the account of a universe that made mistakes. The atoms that assembled into living creatures over immeasurable time produced creatures whose desires correspond — by and large, when not distorted by false beliefs or empty appetites — to what those creatures genuinely need to flourish. The hunger that drives you to seek food is not an inconvenience to be managed; it is nature telling you that food is a genuine good. The thirst that drives you to water is nature's instrument for keeping you alive. And the desire for sexual union, for the companionship of a beloved, for the begetting and raising of children — these are nature speaking just as directly and just as honestly.

This point is essential to the Epicurean classification of desires. Epicurus distinguishes between natural desires and empty (or "vain") desires. Natural desires are those that correspond to something real — something that genuinely satisfies when obtained and genuinely causes suffering when denied. Empty desires are those that have no natural stopping point, no genuine payoff — the hunger for unlimited wealth, for fame, for power over others — desires that feed on themselves and can never be satisfied because there is nothing real at their core.

Sexual desire is natural. The desire for the company and warmth of a beloved is natural. The desire to have children and see them flourish is natural. These belong on the same side of the line as the desire for food, for shelter, for the friendship that Epicurus called the greatest of all the goods that wisdom can produce. They are not suspect. They are not problematic. They are not in need of philosophical suppression. They are part of what a full cup looks like for a human being who is paying honest attention to what nature has actually provided.

The ascetic caricature of Epicurus — the philosopher who counseled bread and water and minimal engagement with bodily pleasure — fails to reflect the what he actually taught not just on the general question of pleasure but specifically and dramatically on the question of sexual and romantic life. Epicurus was not proposing a philosophy for monks.

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## The Voice of Venus: Lucretius on the Drive to Procreate

Lucretius's opening invocation of Venus is followed, over the course of the poem's six books, by a sustained engagement with the role of sexual desire in the natural order that is unlike anything else in ancient philosophy. Lucretius takes the Epicurean commitment to nature seriously enough to treat sexuality as a philosophical subject — not merely as an ethical problem to be managed, but as one of the great facts about the kind of creatures we are.

In Book II, describing the behavior of animals after Lucretius notes the power of pleasure in driving their lives, the picture is consistently one of creatures following nature's design without apology. The mare responds to the scent of the stallion; birds pair in spring; the whole animate world participates in the rhythm of union and renewal that Venus represents. This is not described as a problem. It is described as nature working as nature works — the same nature whose fundamental laws Epicurus has uncovered and whose understanding is the foundation of the philosophical life.

Book IV contains the most extended and philosophically serious engagement with sexual love in the poem — an engagement that modern readers sometimes misread as hostile to love itself, but which is far more careful than that reading allows. Lucretius knows exactly what he is doing in this section, and the care with which he separates legitimate sexual desire from the disease of obsessive romantic passion is one of the finest treatments of the subject in ancient literature.

The distinction Lucretius draws is not between sex as a bad thing and abstinence as the good alternative. It is between the natural pleasure of sexual union — fully endorsed, explicitly good — and the particular pathology that develops when desire for a specific person becomes so consuming that clear judgment is lost. He calls this pathology *amor* in its deranged form: the state in which a man cannot see his beloved clearly, cannot assess her virtues and faults honestly, and builds an idealized image that the actual person can never satisfy. He adorns her with qualities she does not possess. He refuses to see the problems she actually has. He wastes himself in longing for what cannot be obtained in the form he has imagined.

This is not an argument against loving. It is an argument against loving blindly — against allowing the powerful force of desire to overwhelm the very faculty of judgment that would make the relationship genuinely good rather than merely intoxicating and eventually devastating. The Epicurean response to this pathology is not abstinence. It is clarity. Seek genuine pleasure, including the genuine pleasure of sexual union, with eyes open.

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## The End of Book Four: Love That Grows

After his careful dissection of the disease of obsessive passion, Lucretius turns to what genuine love over time actually looks like — and what he says there is one of the most important and least-quoted passages in the entire poem.

The point Lucretius makes at the close of Book IV is that the intoxicating passion of new desire is not the ceiling of what love can become. It is, if anything, the least reliable and least stable form of the feeling — precisely because it is so dominated by the idealizing distortion that desire without judgment produces. What grows in its place, in a genuine relationship pursued with open eyes, is something more lasting and more genuinely pleasurable: the companionship built through shared life, the habitual affection of partners who know each other well and have chosen each other anyway, the satisfaction of a relationship that has been tested by time and has proved its worth.

Lucretius explicitly notes that even without the striking physical beauty that initially inflames desire, habit and shared life can build a deep and durable affection. The woman who is not a conventional beauty can be loved just as genuinely — more genuinely — by the man who has learned to see who she actually is rather than who desire initially projected onto her. This is not a consolation prize. It is the genuine article. The Epicurean calculus of pleasure and pain applied honestly to long-term relationships produces this conclusion: the short-term intensity of blind passion is not worth as much as it seems, and the long-term richness of genuine companionship is worth more than the passion-intoxicated person can perceive.

This is the Epicurean case for committed love and marriage, made not as a moral imperative but as a calculation of what actually produces more pleasure over a life.

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## The Disputed Passage: Will the Wise Man Marry?

No ancient text on the Epicurean view of marriage generates more confusion — or more scholarly controversy — than the passage in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (Book 10) that attempts to summarize the Epicurean position on marriage.

The problem is that different translators have rendered the passage in opposite directions, and the confusion is genuine enough that scholars argue about what the Greek text actually says. Yonge's 1853 translation reads that "the wise man will never marry or beget children" — though even Yonge adds the caveat that "under certain circumstances in his life he will forsake these rules and marry."[2] The Loeb Classical Library translation by R.D. Hicks from 1931 concurs with this reading. But the more recent *Epicurus Reader* translation by Inwood and Gerson takes the opposite position: "the wise man will marry and father children."[3] George Strodach's 1963 translation also endorses this reading: "the wise man will marry and beget children... but he will marry according to his station in life, whatever it may be."[4]

The textual situation is genuinely difficult, and the debate among scholars is legitimate. But there is a piece of evidence that cuts through the textual uncertainty in a way that no translation dispute can obscure: Epicurus's own will.

In the last will and testament of Epicurus — preserved by Diogenes Laertius — Epicurus makes provision for the daughter of his valued colleague and student Metrodorus to be married when she comes of age, and specifies that those managing the philosophical community's affairs should see to this. Epicurus is not merely tolerating the idea that some people might marry. He is actively arranging a marriage as part of his final wishes for the community he is leaving behind. A man who considered marriage a philosophical mistake to be avoided does not in-

clude marriage arrangements in his will for the next generation of his community.

Combined with the "according to circumstances" qualifier that appears in virtually every translation — even the ones most hostile to marriage — the picture that emerges is recognizably Epicurean: marriage, like every other significant life choice, is to be evaluated by the standard of whether it genuinely produces more pleasure than pain for the person in question, given their actual circumstances and capacities.[5] The answer for most people, given the natural desires for companionship, sexual union, and children, will be yes. The point is not that every Epicurean must marry. The point is that marriage is a genuine good that the Epicurean philosopher has every reason to pursue — not in spite of the philosophy, but because of it.

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## The Hazards of Promiscuity: What Epicurus Actually Warned Against

The letter attributed to Epicurus regarding erotic pleasure — addressed to a young man in the context of advice about how to live — contains a warning that is sometimes cited as evidence that Epicurus was generally suspicious of sexual pleasure. Read carefully, it says nothing of the kind.

The warning Epicurus gives is not against sex. It is against the specific pattern of promiscuous pursuit of sexual pleasure without regard for the costs — the kind of behavior that creates enmities, destroys reputations, produces unwanted consequences, and ultimately generates more pain than pleasure through the disruption it causes to the relationships and social fabric on which genuine happiness depends. Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus said intercourse has never done anyone any good, and it is well if it does no harm — a statement that sounds more sweeping than it is when taken in context.

The context is a warning to a young man about a specific pattern of behavior: the pursuit of erotic pleasure in ways that are reckless, that ignore the social consequences, that treat sex as an isolated gratification detached from the relationships and responsibilities that give it its genuine depth. This is not a blanket in-

dictment of sexual pleasure. It is the same kind of warning that Epicurus gives about any pleasure pursued without prudential calculation — including the pleasures of the table, of wine, of any activity that can be undertaken either wisely or recklessly.

Vatican Saying 51 captures the relevant principle: "I understand from you that your natural inclination toward sexual pleasure is too strong for you. Follow your inclination so long as you neither violate the laws, nor disturb well-established customs, nor harm any of your neighbors, nor injure your own body, nor waste your substance."[6] This is the Epicurean framework for sexual pleasure: follow your nature, but apply the same prudential calculation you apply to everything else. The test is not virtue in the abstract. The test is whether the specific pursuit produces more genuine pleasure than pain, all costs calculated.

The man who pursues sexual pleasure in ways that damage his health, alienate his friends, create enmities, destroy his financial stability, or undermine his capacity for the genuine goods of sustained relationships — that man has made a bad Epicurean calculation. The man who pursues sexual pleasure within the context of a genuine relationship, with clear eyes and honest judgment, building the kind of affection that Lucretius describes at the end of Book IV — that man has made a very good one.

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## Epicurus and the Pederasty of the Greek Philosophical Schools

The sexual culture of the ancient Greek philosophical world presents a picture that is, to modern eyes, profoundly uncomfortable — and that was not entirely comfortable to Epicurus either, for reasons that are recognizably consistent with his philosophy.

The practice of *paideia* in ancient Greece included a tradition of *pederasty* — sexual relationships between adult male philosophers and their adolescent male students — that was idealized in Platonic philosophy as a form of spiritual elevation. Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* present the relationship between older and younger men as a vehicle for philosophical advancement, with eros — the

erotic charge between teacher and student — serving as the impulse that drives both toward contemplation of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True.

Epicurus's attitude toward this tradition was notably different. Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus distinguished himself from the Platonic tradition in this respect, and the general testimony of the ancient sources suggests that the Epicurean Garden was not characterized by the pederastic relationships that were common in the Academy and in broader Greek philosophical culture. This was not a coincidence. The Epicurean critique operates on multiple levels.

At the most basic level, the power differential inherent in a relationship between a mature philosopher and an adolescent student makes genuine mutual consent difficult to evaluate honestly. The student who is dependent on the teacher's approval, whose philosophical education and social standing are in the teacher's hands, is not in a position to evaluate or express preferences freely. The Epicurean calculus of pleasure and pain — which requires honest assessment, clear judgment, and genuine reciprocity in relationships of genuine friendship — cannot function cleanly in a context structured by such profound inequality.

At a second level, the Platonic idealization of pederastic eros as a vehicle for spiritual ascent is precisely the kind of philosophical construction that Epicurus rejected throughout his philosophy. The claim that erotic desire for a beautiful young man, properly channeled, leads the philosopher toward knowledge of the Form of Beauty itself — that desire, sublimated, becomes the engine of philosophical ascent — is the Platonic misuse of genuine natural feeling in the service of a metaphysics that the Epicurean Canon cannot verify. Epicurus had no use for the Form of Beauty, and correspondingly no use for the philosophical justification of pederasty that depended on it.

The Epicurean community that Epicurus actually built was notable for including women — Leontion, Themista, and others — as full philosophical participants, not as servants or sexual objects but as friends and students in the full sense. This inclusion itself represents a different model of what philosophical community looked like: less hierarchical, less organized around the idealization of relationships between dominant and subordinate males, and more genuinely egalitarian in its structure of friendship. This is not a coincidence. It follows

from the Epicurean commitment to friendship as a genuine good pursued among equals.

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## The Celibacy Slander

One of the more remarkable accusations that appears occasionally in ancient and some modern discussions of Epicurean philosophy is that Epicurus himself was celibate — or that the Epicurean community practiced a kind of philosophical celibacy. This allegation is not supported by the ancient evidence, and it appears to rest on a confusion between the authentic Epicurean tradition and the later traditions of philosophical and religious asceticism that were influenced by Platonic and later Christian ideas.

There is no credible ancient testimony that Epicurus himself was celibate. Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus had relationships with women in his community, including Leontion. The community he founded included women, children, and slaves as full participants — a household model that implies the normal activities of household life, including sexual partnership and the raising of children.

The celibacy accusation appears to arise from two sources. The first is the general hostile tradition of ancient commentary that consistently tried to paint Epicurus in whatever light would be most damaging, and that could apply either the "dissolute sensualist" accusation or the "cold ascetic" accusation depending on which seemed more rhetorically effective in a given context. Both accusations came from the same hostile well; they cannot both be true; and DeWitt's warning about reading ancient commentary on Epicurus with full awareness of the ideological stakes applies with particular force in discussions of his sexual ethics.

The second source is the confusion between the genuine Epicurean philosophical ideal — which does include recommendations to avoid the specific pathologies of obsessive romantic passion and reckless promiscuity — and the very different ascetic ideal of celibacy as a positive philosophical or spiritual achievement. For Epicurus, celibacy is not a philosophical achievement. It is a deprivation of a genuine good. The Epicurean philosopher who chooses celibacy is not

performing an act of philosophical discipline. He is declining a natural pleasure that his own philosophy endorses — and doing so without any philosophical justification that the Canon can validate.

If anything, the Epicurean community's continued existence across generations is itself evidence against celibacy. Communities that practice genuine celibacy do not reproduce themselves biologically. The Epicurean school survived and spread through the ancient world for generations not because it recruited only from outside (though it welcomed all comers) but because it produced families, raised children, and transmitted the philosophy to the next generation through the normal processes of human life. Epicurus's will — with its careful provisions for the children of the community's members — is not the will of a man who thought biological reproduction was a philosophical problem.

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## Marriage, Children, and the Epicurean Calculation

The case for marriage and children from the Epicurean standpoint is not the case that moralists and religious traditions have typically made. It is not grounded in duty, in divine command, in natural law in the abstract, or in the social obligation to perpetuate the species. It is grounded in the honest calculation of what actually produces more pleasure than pain over the course of a human life — and that calculation, applied honestly by most people, yields a robust endorsement of marriage and family.

The natural desires for sexual partnership and for children are among the strongest nature has placed in us. They correspond to genuine goods — goods that are genuinely satisfying when obtained and genuinely painful when denied. A life from which these goods are absent by choice — absent not because circumstances prevented them but because a philosophical position declared them unnecessary or dangerous — is a life that has surrendered something real. It is a half-full cup, and Vatican Saying 63 says plainly that the man who goes past the limit of frugality and denies himself genuine goods is in the same error as the man who indulges excessively.[7]

Children, in particular, represent a dimension of genuine pleasure that is not available through any other route. The pleasure of raising a child — watching a person you have made and loved develop into their own human being, building the kind of relationship that deepens over decades, having before you a living embodiment of the continuity between your life and the next generation — is genuinely among the most complex and substantial pleasures available to a human being. It involves pain, obviously, but the pains of parenthood are, for most people who choose it honestly, vastly outweighed by the pleasures parenthood provides.

The Epicurean philosopher who avoids marriage and children because the philosophy allegedly counsels restraint in natural pleasures has misread the philosophy at the most fundamental level. The philosophy counsels prudence — honest calculation — not restraint. And honest calculation, applied to the question of whether to pursue genuine natural desires for companionship, sexual union, and children, does not produce a recommendation for abstinence. It produces a recommendation to pursue these goods wisely — with clear eyes, with honest assessment of the particular person and relationship in question, with the kind of long-term thinking that Lucretius describes at the end of Book IV — and to build the kind of life that fills the cup rather than leaving it empty in the name of a philosophical discipline that Epicurus never actually taught.

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## What Prudence Looks Like in Practice

The Epicurean approach to sexual and romantic life is not a set of rules. It is a method of evaluation. Applied to the specific decisions a person faces, it produces different conclusions for different people in different circumstances — which is exactly what it should do, given that people's circumstances, natures, and available options genuinely differ.

For the young person in the grip of infatuation, prudence counsels Lucretius's advice: look at what you are actually seeing, not at the idealized image desire has constructed. The beloved is a real person with real qualities and real faults. The question is whether those real qualities and real faults, honestly assessed, make this the kind of relationship that will genuinely satisfy over time — not whether

the current intensity of desire is high, which tells you relatively little about the long-term prospects.

For the person considering marriage, prudence counsels honest assessment of what the relationship actually provides and what it actually costs — the full ledger, including the pleasure of companionship and sex and shared life and children, and the genuine demands that these also bring. The calculation will often favor marriage, for the reasons already discussed. But it will not favor every marriage with every person under every set of circumstances, and the Epicurean framework is honest about that.

For the person in a long-term relationship, prudence counsels attention to what Lucretius describes at the end of Book IV: the gradual building of genuine affection through shared life, the kind of love that does not depend on the specific intensity of physical attraction but on something more durable. This is not a fall from the authentic experience of love. It is, on the Epicurean account, its fullest and most reliable form.

And for the community as a whole, the Epicurean framework endorses the practical consequences that Epicurus himself drew in his will: the community should provide for the marriages of its members' children, should support families, should treat the normal goods of household and sexual and family life not as distractions from philosophy but as part of what a genuinely good life looks like.

No fate determines these outcomes. No god rewards the celibate or punishes the parent. Nature has provided the desires; reason provides the instrument for evaluating how to pursue them wisely; and the genuine pleasures of love, sex, marriage, and family are among the richest and most enduring goods available to the human creature that nature has made.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Was Epicurus a Psychological Hedonist, an Ethical Hedonist, Both, or Neither?

Before engaging with the debate described in this article, a preliminary warning is necessary: **the terms "psychological hedonism" and "ethical hedonism" are not Epicurean terms**. They were not used by Epicurus. They were not used by his immediate successors. They originate with Henry Sidgwick, a 19th-century British Utilitarian philosopher, who coined the paired labels specifically to diagnose an internal tension within Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian theory — a theory Epicurus never held and would have found alien in important respects.

This means that every effort to place Epicurus within Sidgwick's categories — to declare him a "psychological hedonist" or an "ethical hedonist" — is an effort to fit ancient Greek philosophy into boxes that were built for an entirely different purpose, in an entirely different intellectual context, more than two thousand years later. The exercise is not useless, as we will see: careful scholars have drawn useful observations from it, and the more defensible label, if one must be chosen, can be identified. But the exercise carries real hazards. The categories are too coarse for the philosophy they are being applied to, and spending too much effort determining which Sidgwickian box to put Epicurus in risks distorting the very philosophy one is trying to understand. The most reliable way to understand Epicurus is to read Epicurus — in his own words, on his own terms — rather than to translate him into frameworks designed for someone else.

With that warning clearly stated, we can survey the debate — because it has been conducted by serious scholars and reflects genuine questions about Epicurean texts, and those questions call for careful answers.

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## Origin and Meaning of the Terms

**Psychological hedonism** and **ethical hedonism** as a formal paired distinction were introduced by Henry Sidgwick in *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). Sidgwick developed the distinction because he was dissatisfied with an internal inconsistency in Bentham and Mill: Bentham had simultaneously asserted that people *do* always pursue pleasure (a psychological claim) and that people *ought* to pursue the greatest general happiness (an ethical claim), without adequately explaining how the second could have any force given the first. Sidgwick labeled these two strands "psychological hedonism" and "ethical hedonism" and treated them as the central tension in utilitarian thought.

The word "hedonism" itself, derived from the ancient Greek *hēdonē* (pleasure), is not much older — its earliest recorded use in English dates only to the 1850s. Neither Epicurus nor his school used the word as a label for their own philosophy.

**Psychological hedonism**, as Sidgwick defined it, is a *descriptive* thesis: the claim that all human beings are, as a matter of psychological fact, always ultimately motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. It makes no claim about what people *should* do. It says this is simply how human motivation works. Everyone who does anything — including the ascetic who starves himself, the martyr who chooses death, or the Stoic who claims to be motivated by virtue alone — is, on this view, ultimately seeking something they find pleasurable.

**Ethical hedonism**, by contrast, is a *normative* or *prescriptive* thesis: the claim that pleasure *ought* to be the goal of human action — that it is the right and rational standard for living — and that actions are good insofar as they produce pleasure and bad insofar as they produce pain. It says nothing about whether people actually pursue pleasure in all their actions. It is perfectly consistent with ethical hedonism to hold that people frequently and disastrously fail to pursue pleasure, and that philosophy is needed to correct these errors.

The two theses are logically independent. You can hold ethical hedonism without holding psychological hedonism, and vice versa. The question of which Epicurus held — or whether he held both or neither — is what divides the com-

mentators. But again: this is a question framed in someone else's vocabulary, and that framing introduces its own distortions from the outset.

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## The Case for Psychological Hedonism

### Main Arguments

The central argument for reading Epicurus as a psychological hedonist begins with what scholars call the *cradle argument*. Epicurus appeals repeatedly to the behavior of young animals and human infants as evidence for his hedonism. The most explicit passage is in the *Letter to Menoeceus*: when we speak of pleasure as the goal, "we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. For it is not continuous drinkings and revellings... that produce a pleasant life, but sober thinking... [But] pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. We recognize pleasure as the first and innate good."[1] And Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus appealed to how all animals, from birth, "rush toward pleasure and flee from pain without any reasoning."

This appeal to what all creatures naturally *do* — not what they *ought* to do — has the character of a descriptive, empirical claim. The infant does not deliberate about whether to seek warmth or recoil from pain. If Epicurus were making only a normative claim, the behavior of infants and animals would be irrelevant evidence — they cannot deliberate about what they *ought* to do. The fact that he uses their behavior as *evidence* for his position suggests he believes the claim has empirical, psychological content.

A second argument concerns what Epicurus says we can observe about human motivation when we look past stated goals to actual behavior. Reading Principal Doctrine 25 — "If you do not on every occasion refer each of your actions to nature's end, but turn to some other criterion in choosing or avoiding, your actions will not be consistent with your reasoning" — the scholar Raphael Woolf has argued that this doctrine makes most sense as an affirmation of psychological hedonism.[2] On Woolf's reading, Epicurus is saying that whatever people claim their goals to be, their actual behavior will reveal that nature's end — pleasure — is still operating as the real motivation. The words (*logoi*) and the deeds (*praxeis*)

will diverge when someone pretends to pursue something other than pleasure, because their deeds will continue tracking nature's goal even when their words don't.

Woolf's 2004 paper in *Phronesis* — "What Kind of Hedonist Was Epicurus?" — is the most thorough scholarly defense of the psychological reading. Woolf argues that there is considerable evidence in favor of a psychological reading of Epicurean hedonism, evidence that includes some of the very texts that Cooper cites in support of the ethical reading.

Emily Austin, in *Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life* (2023), also defends a version of the psychological reading, holding that Epicurus grounded his ethics in facts about what living creatures actually pursue by nature — making the descriptive and normative elements of the theory deeply intertwined.

### Scholarly Sources Supporting the Psychological Reading

- **Raphael Woolf**, "What Kind of Hedonist Was Epicurus?" *Phronesis* 49 (2004): 303–322. The most focused defense of the psychological reading against Cooper.
- **Emily Austin**, *Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Supports the naturalistically grounded reading of Epicurean hedonism.
- Various scholars who treat the cradle argument as evidence for psychological claims, including references in **Tim O'Keefe**, *Epicurus on Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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## The Case for Ethical Hedonism

### Main Arguments

The case for reading Epicurus as an ethical rather than psychological hedonist begins with a logical point that Larry J. Waggle puts clearly in his 2007 paper "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?" published in *Revista de Filosofía*: if Epicurus's ethical theory turns out to be solely one of psychological hedonism, then it is not an ethical theory. It is a descriptive theory about human motiva-

tion, and nothing more. If people inevitably and always pursue pleasure whether they want to or not, the injunction to pursue pleasure becomes vacuous — you don't need philosophy to tell you what you're going to do anyway. The very existence of Epicurean philosophy as a practical program for how to live implies that people can choose differently, and that the goal of the philosophy is to help them choose *correctly*.

John Cooper's argument in "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus" (in *Reason and Emotion*, Princeton University Press, 1999) presses this point systematically. Cooper argues that Principal Doctrine 25 is best read as warning Epicureans that they *can* drift away from the natural standard of pleasure — that it is genuinely possible to act in pursuit of other goals — and that philosophy is necessary precisely because this drift is a real danger.[3] On this reading, PD 25 is not a description of how everyone inevitably behaves but an admonition about what happens when you fail to apply the Epicurean standard consistently. The fact that the warning is necessary is evidence that people are capable of genuinely departing from the pursuit of pleasure, which is only possible if psychological hedonism is false.

Waggle makes a further methodological argument: we should prioritize Epicurus's own surviving writings over later doxographical accounts, and when we do, the prescriptive character of the ethics is unmistakable. The *Letter to Menoeceus* is full of *oughts* and imperatives — "we must practice the things that produce happiness," "we must reckon that some desires are natural and necessary... others natural but not necessary" — none of which would make sense if the agent were determined by nature to pursue pleasure regardless.[4] The prescriptive language requires the possibility of choosing otherwise.

Julia Annas, in *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993) — the most comprehensive treatment of ancient ethical theories in the eudaimonistic tradition — treats Epicurus primarily as an ethical theorist in the normative sense, showing how his account of pleasure as the final end participates in the same structure as Aristotle's account of eudaimonia: it specifies what the good life consists in, not a mechanism that compels behavior.

Gosling and Taylor, in *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford University Press, 1982), argue that the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures in Epicur-

us — and the complex calculus by which some pleasures are to be avoided because they produce greater pain — presupposes genuine deliberative agency. A purely psychological hedonist account would have no room for the extensive practical reasoning Epicurus recommends.

### Scholarly Sources Supporting the Ethical Reading

- **John M. Cooper**, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 485–514. The leading defense of the ethical reading.
- **Larry J. Waggle**, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?" *Revista de Filosofía* 25, no. 57 (2007): 73–88. Supports Cooper's conclusion and adds methodological arguments about the priority of primary sources.
- **Julia Annas**, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993). Treats Epicurus within the normative eudaimonistic tradition.
- **J.C.B. Gosling and C.C.W. Taylor**, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford University Press, 1982). Influential analysis noting that the Epicurean distinction between pleasure types presupposes deliberative agency.

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## What Long, Sedley, and Tsouna Contribute

Neither A.A. Long nor David Sedley — the two most influential English-language scholars of Hellenistic philosophy — has written papers focused specifically on the psychological vs. ethical hedonism question in Epicurus. Their major collaborative work, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), presents Epicurus's ethical hedonism primarily in its normative dimension: as an account of what the good life consists in and why pleasure is the right standard for evaluating it.

Long's various articles on Epicurean ethics consistently treat the philosophy as a practical prescriptive program — which presupposes the ethical rather than psychological reading. Sedley's scholarship, particularly his work on Epicurean physics and epistemology, is less directly relevant to the hedonism question, though his emphasis on Epicurean naturalism — the view that nature provides the standard for how to live — is consistent with either reading and perhaps

most naturally supports the view that nature both describes what creatures pursue and prescribes what they ought to pursue.

Voula Tsouna's work on Epicurean ethics and Philodemus, including *The Ethics of Philodemus* (Oxford University Press, 2007), engages extensively with Epicurean pleasure theory without specifically adjudicating the psychological vs. ethical debate — but her treatment of Epicurean therapeutic ethics presupposes that agents can make genuinely different choices, which leans toward the ethical reading.

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## The Cradle Argument: Two Different Things It Might Prove

The most important textual evidence for the psychological reading is the cradle argument — the appeal to infant and animal behavior as evidence for hedonism. But what exactly does this argument prove?

**Reading One: "The young of all species pursue pleasure — this is evidence that hedonism is the call of nature."**

On this reading, the cradle argument establishes that pleasure-seeking is what nature has inscribed in every living creature from birth. It is a foundational *factual* claim about how life works at its most basic level. The fact that infants and animals pursue pleasure before they have any capacity for deliberation shows that pleasure is nature's own signal — the faculty it has provided for evaluating experiences. This grounds the ethical claim: pleasure *ought* to be the goal because nature has made it the natural good. The psychological fact and the ethical prescription are connected, but the former does not render the latter vacuous. Rather, the natural fact is what justifies the ethical norm.

**Reading Two: "Everyone pursues what they think of as pleasure whether they admit it or not — this is the psychological hedonist claim."**

On this reading, the cradle argument supports the stronger claim that even adults who claim to be motivated by virtue, duty, divine command, or anything other than pleasure are actually, at a deeper level, pursuing something they find pleasurable — perhaps the pleasure of feeling virtuous, or the pleasure of avoid-

ing guilt. The Stoic who claims to act from virtue alone is, on this view, actually pursuing the pleasure of living in conformity with his conception of reason.

**Which reading is stronger?**

Reading One is the stronger interpretation of Epicurus, and more defensible as a philosophical position. The claim that the young of all species pursue pleasure before any deliberation is an *observable, empirical* fact that does genuine philosophical work. It establishes that pleasure is not an arbitrary cultural preference or a philosophical construction but a feature of how living creatures are constituted by nature. This makes it the natural standard for evaluation — the baseline against which human choices can be assessed as correct or mistaken.

Reading Two, by contrast, faces a serious problem of explanatory inflation. If every action by every person in every circumstance is "really" about pleasure at some deep level, the claim becomes unfalsifiable — and therefore philosophically empty. The Stoic who endures great pain for virtue, the ascetic who renounces bodily pleasure, the martyr who dies for a cause — all of these, on Reading Two, are "really" pursuing pleasure. But the explanation requires so many levels of reconstruction — finding the "hidden" pleasure in every self-denial — that the concept of pleasure loses any determinate content. This is precisely the problem that motivates Cooper's objection: a purely psychological hedonism collapses into either a tautology or a form of covert determinism incompatible with the genuine agency that Epicurean philosophy presupposes.

Reading One also connects more naturally to the practical program of Epicurean philosophy. If everyone already inevitably pursues pleasure whether they know it or not (Reading Two), why is philosophy necessary? Why does Epicurus write letters urging his friends to think carefully about what they pursue, warning them against the pursuit of wealth or political power, distinguishing natural from empty desires? A philosophy addressed to people who are already guaranteed to pursue pleasure correctly is pointless. A philosophy addressed to people who need help identifying and pursuing genuine goods is urgently necessary.

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## The EpicurusToday Position

The conclusion of this analysis should be stated alongside a renewed statement of its limits.

The terms "psychological hedonism" and "ethical hedonism" are alien to Epicurus. They originate with Henry Sidgwick — a 19th-century Utilitarian — and were designed to solve problems *within Utilitarianism*, not to illuminate Epicurean philosophy. Any reader who comes to Epicurus primarily through this lens risks squeezing an original, independently developed philosophy into a frame it was never meant to fit. The better approach — always — is to read what Epicurus actually wrote and said, in its own context, without reaching for Sidgwick's vocabulary as an organizing tool.

That said, if one must work within the Sidgwickian categories — and scholars have done so, with results worth engaging — the most defensible conclusion is that Epicurus was primarily an **ethical hedonist** who used naturalistic observation to ground and justify his normative claims. His appeal to what all creatures naturally do is not a claim that all human actions are therefore automatically and inevitably directed at pleasure. It is evidence that pleasure is the *right* standard — that nature itself has identified it as the genuine good — and therefore that a philosophy aimed at helping people understand and pursue genuine pleasure is both necessary and correct.

The psychological element in Epicurus is real but limited: the feelings of pleasure and pain are natural, non-rational faculties that operate in all living creatures before any deliberation. This establishes their evidential authority as criteria of the good. But the fact that these faculties exist does not mean they always guide behavior correctly — false beliefs, empty desires, and philosophical errors all distort the guidance they provide. That is precisely why philosophy is necessary.

The most practically important consequence of this position is one that has been central to EpicurusToday from the beginning: the Epicurean project is not an apology for pleasure-seeking on the grounds that "everyone does it anyway." It is a positive, freedom-affirming argument that pleasure is the right guide *because*

*nature has provided it as such*, and that wisdom and reason are the instruments by which we learn to follow that guide effectively.

But we return to where we began. These labels — psychological, ethical, hedonist — are tools borrowed from a different workshop, built for different purposes. They can reveal something, used carefully. Used carelessly, or treated as the primary lens for reading Epicurus, they distort more than they illuminate. For those who want to understand Epicurus on his own terms, the right place to start is not Sidgwick, but Epicurus himself.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Epicurus and the Pleasure of Rebelling Against Plato

## Plato as the Mainstream

Say the word "pleasure" in connection with Epicurus and many people picture the same narrow thing: If they have a positive outlook on pleasure, they think of a good meal, a warm bath, a moment of bodily comfort. If they have a negative outlook on pleasure, they think of conspicuous consumption, self-indulgence, and luxurious pampering. Rarely today is "pleasure" the first word associated with art, science, literature, exploration, or human achievement.

This bipolar tendency is not the result of innocent simplification. It has served, since antiquity, as a convenient way to dismiss what Epicurus actually claimed about the meaning of life. Joking about pigs in a sty or claims for the overwhelming pleasure of bread and water are much easier than dealing with what Epicurus actually taught. Epicurus never confined pleasure either to small, passing comforts or to exuberant luxury. Instead, he taught pleasure as something much larger and far more serious: pleasure is the fully-felt impact of what actually matters to you. Pleasure is measured by how deeply you value and cherish the people, the convictions, and the confidence that make your life worth living.

When the feeling of pleasure is placed at the center of our attention we see that the meaning of life is not dry intellectual assent to a correct proposition about the good. "Meaning" is what we feel when a physical or mental experience matters positively to us and we know it. That distinction — between assenting to an abstraction and actually feeling the difference it makes — is the thread running under everything that follows in this article about Epicurus' rebellion against Platonism.

Epicurus's quarrel with Plato was never a disagreement over different tastes or the relative value of bread and water or geometry. It was a quarrel over whether a life's meaning is to be found in an otherworldly "Good" that we must labor to reach through ruthless logic and devotion to otherworldly idealism, or whether life's true meaning is to be found in the immediate, felt reality of what you actually care about.

To call Epicurus a rebel against Plato is to identify the one clean break from what was, at the time Epicurus was born in 341 BC, the mainstream orthodoxy of Greek philosophy. Socrates supplied the dialectic method and the claim of moral superiority on which Plato built the system. Some later philosophers such as Aristotle pushed back against particular claims, but they kept the central framework standing.

Aristotle rejected Plato's realm of Forms, but he kept the idea that there is a master plan, he kept the primacy of reason over sensation, he kept ethics tied to good of the state rather than the individual, and he kept a divine prime mover behind the motion of the world. Zeno's Stoics absorbed Plato's identification of Nature with a divine, rational order and built its whole ethics on conformity to it. All roads in Greek philosophy — physics, epistemology, or ethics — run through the Academy of Plato.

Epicurus stands far above all others who rejected that road. At EpicureanFriends I speak regularly about Norman DeWitt's 1954 book *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, which puts the point bluntly: Epicurus must be recognized "also as a moral reformer," and the historians who miss this are "failing to discern that reformers are rebels."[1] DeWitt goes further, identifying the animating hostility by name:

> As a man of science Epicurus returned to the tradition of the Ionian thinkers, which had been interrupted by Socrates and Plato. The chief positive influence on his thinking was Ionian, the chief negative influence Platonic. The error in this instance consists in the failure to recognize Epicurus as an Antiplatonist and a penetrating critic of Platonism.[2] — DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, Ch. I, "A Synoptic View of Epicureanism"[3]

And again, more specifically:

> [Epicurus] exalted Nature as the norm of truth, revolting against Plato, who regarded Reason as the norm and hypostatized it as a divine existence. — DeWitt, Ch. I

DeWitt returns to the theme again and again throughout his book because the evidence keeps producing examples of it. The relationship between Epicurus and Plato is not incidental to understanding Epicurus – it is the key without which Epicurus is bound to be totally misunderstood, because it is in many ways the negative image of Plato's.

## A Long Ignored Thesis Returning To Prominence

DeWitt's 1954 book is far from the only mention of this thesis for how best to understand Epicurus. Paul Shorey, writing in the Harvard Studies in Classical Philology half a century before DeWitt's book appeared, had in 1901 traced a series of specific Epicurean "polemic[s] against the Timaeus" — against Plato's craftsman-god, against his treatment of time as "a moving image of eternity," against the Philebus — scattered like buckshot across the Epicurean and Lucretian corpus.[4]

By 1976, David Sedley could refer to "Epicurus' reaction against Platonism" as "already a well-worked topic" among specialists and move on without further comment, confident his readers would already grant the point. Unfortunately, comments like these were largely confined to the academic press, and it was DeWitt alone who insisted on the fuller recognition that the friction between Epicurus and Plato was not incidental but total. Epicurean references to Platonism are not polemical asides here and mocking nicknames there, but the organizing principle behind Epicurus's physics, canonics, and ethics all at once.

DeWitt's book is now closing in on its hundredth year of existence, but for most of that stretch professional commentary has treated Epicurus as a minor figure working out variations on themes set by others. Aside from Epicurus' always-praised advice about prudent use of common sense in pursuing pleasure, his other views were treated as those of an eccentric physicist patching up Democritus, an unpersuasive commentator on the senses and empiricism, or an unsystematic moralist offering little more than folk wisdom about simple living. The idea that his entire system was constructed, point by point, as a deliberate demolition of

Plato's mainstream philosophy did not fit that picture or interest those whose primary objective was to use Epicurus to endorse their own morality, so his deeper views have largely been set aside by popular writers.

There are signs that this is changing, however. Kelly Arenson's *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus* reconstructs, in careful detail, exactly the opposition DeWitt had already sketched: Plato's devaluation of bodily pleasure as beneath the philosopher's attention against Epicurus's insistence that pleasure, rightly understood, is the very thing philosophy exists to secure. Emily Austin's *Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life* makes a version of the same case for a popular readership, presenting Epicurean ethics as a considered alternative to — not a lesser cousin of — the specious "eudaimonism" that Plato and Aristotle built into the DNA of Greek moral philosophy.

The remainder of this article will pick up the major threads of Epicurus' rejection of Platonism and set them out one by one so that more attention can be focused on them in the future.

## Physics: The Rebellion Against the Unseen

Before Plato can describe how the cosmos was built, he lays down a prior distinction on which everything else in the *Timaeus* depends. He sorts everything that exists into two separate kinds, one fully real and one that never quite is:

> First then, in my judgment, we must make a distinction and ask, What is that which always is and has no becoming; and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state; but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is. — Plato, *Timaeus* 27d–28a

Everything the senses touch — every object in the visible, changing world — falls on the second side of that line, and so counts, on Plato's own terms, as something that "never really is." Full reality belongs only to what reason alone can grasp: the eternal, unchanging Forms. This distinction is not a side point - it is the premise that makes a benevolent craftsman-god necessary in the first place, to explain why a world that is always only "becoming" exists at all. This is the creat-

or Plato calls the demiurge, who imposes mathematical order on a chaotic, pre-existing material and orients the whole toward the good:

> He was good, and one who is good can never have any grudge against anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should come as near as possible to being like himself. — Plato, *Timaeus* 29e

Matter, in this account, is inert stuff waiting on an external, intelligent cause to move and shape it. The visible world of change is a copy — an imperfect, secondary reflection of an eternal, unchanging realm of Forms, which alone counts as fully real.

Epicurus rejects every piece of this. His first two Elementary Principles state that matter can neither be created nor destroyed; his third, that the universe consists of nothing but atoms and void. There is no room in that inventory for an incorporeal Form, an incorporeal soul, or an incorporeal, world-ordering mind. As DeWitt puts it, tracing the logic through:

> If there is nothing incorporeal except void, the eternal ideas and the divine incorporeal reason are alike absurdities... Consequently there was no need of the ordering mind (*nous*) according to Anaxagoras or of the divine demiurge of Plato. Both of these become absurdities. — DeWitt, Ch. VII, "The Canon, Reason and Nature"

Epicurus does not simply delete Plato's "Being" and leave nothing behind in its place. He relocates permanence into the physical world itself, in the atoms. Compounds arise and perish constantly — that much is "becoming," and Epicurus grants it freely — but the atoms that make them up do not:

> Moreover, we must suppose that the atoms do not possess any of the qualities belonging to perceptible things, except shape, weight, and size, and all that necessarily goes with shape. For every quality changes; but the atoms do not change at all, since there must needs be something which remains solid and indissoluble at the dissolution of compounds, which can cause changes... For this reason it is essential that the bodies which shift their position should be imperishable and should not possess the nature of what changes, but parts and configuration of their own. — Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* §54 (tr. Bailey)

Plato needed two separate levels of existence, one lower than the other, because he had already decided that only the unchanging fully deserves to be called real. Epicurus needs only one level: nature, which runs without a break from imperishable atom to perishable compound, and the senses can reach out toward every part of it. Nothing is held back in some higher, untouchable order of being that only reason – without assistance from the senses – can enter.

Where Plato's world requires a mind to set it moving, Epicurus's atoms move on their own, ceaselessly, by their own power of weight — no mover needed, divine or otherwise:

> His argument, however, was no worse than that of Aristotle... So with volition, and apart from it the sole causes in the universe were the blind motions of the atoms... Thus to him motion was inherent in matter and no external cause of motion existed, while to Plato matter was inert and the cause of motion was external to it. — DeWitt, Ch. IX, "The New Physics"

The two maps of the nature of the universe disagree just as sharply on scale. Plato's cosmos in the *Timaeus* is a single finite sphere, deliberately shaped, with no "outside" and therefore no meaningful up or down. Epicurus's universe is infinite in every direction, stocked with an infinite supply of atoms in infinite void, so that — as his letter to Herodotus puts it — "there are infinite worlds both like and unlike this world of ours."[5] DeWitt notes that Epicurus took direct aim at Plato's finitism on exactly this point, refusing even to grant the terms of the argument:

> Plato flouted this theory on the ground that the universe was spherical, which implied that it was finite... Epicurus in a single paragraph essays to immunize the minds of his disciples against certain views propounded by Plato and by Aristotle.[6] — DeWitt, Ch. IX[7]

Even Plato's account of the atom's own physical durability came in for a direct hit. Plato, in the *Timaeus*, imagined the smallest particles of the elements as geometric solids with edges that could wear down over time — a mechanism he used to explain the decay of old age. Epicurus, whose atoms are by definition "uncuttable," found this absurd enough to devote a whole treatise to it, titled *The Corner in the Atom* — a title that only makes sense, DeWitt infers, once you know "that Plato had accounted for the phenomena of old age by postulating

the detrition of the sharp edges of his angular atoms."[8] Where Plato's atoms could be worn away like river stones, Epicurus's could not be touched at all.

DeWitt makes the point elsewhere that this was never an isolated quirk of Plato's physics — it was the seed of the whole theory of Forms. Plato took his geometric solids as the ultimate constituents of matter and then, by simple analogy, extended the same reasoning to ethics and politics: if perfect spheres and perfect cubes exist as eternal realities behind the imperfect shapes we see, why should perfect Justice not exist the same way, behind every imperfect just act? On this reasoning the whole apparatus of the *Republic* — a work DeWitt describes as recording "only part of" Plato's search for that perfect, otherworldly Justice — grows directly out of the geometric style of atomism Epicurus had already rejected on physical grounds. Deny that atoms are perfect, unchanging geometric solids, and the analogy that carries the argument from geometry to ethics collapses with it.

And behind all of this stands a rejection not just of Plato's specific conclusions but of his entire mathematical method for reaching them. Plato's curriculum in the Academy ran through geometry and astronomy as the disciplines that trained the mind to grasp eternal, unchanging truth. These same faculties, on his account, were what let the philosopher glimpse the Forms themselves. Epicurus threw the whole apparatus out of his own curriculum:

> In his rejection of dialectic and mathematics Epicurus was motivated partly by his animosity toward Platonism... Geometry was repudiated as having no bearing upon the happy life. — DeWitt, Ch. VI, "The New Education"

The function of the demiurge was not simply a mechanical curiosity to be dismissed on physical grounds; it also assigned the gods a job Epicurus refused to let them keep. As David Sedley has written, Plato gave god two distinct roles, and Epicurus accepted only one of them:

> Plato had assigned god a double role: world governor and object of human emulation. Epicurus argued vehemently against the first role, but endorsed the second. — David Sedley, "Epicurus: Theological Innatism"

Epicurus's gods are worth contemplating and emulating precisely because they are blessed and untroubled — models of the pleasant life at its most complete. But they never *govern* anything, and Epicurus was equally firm that even our

very ability to conceive of them owes nothing to a Platonist mechanism. Sedley is explicit that the natural, inborn preconception of the gods which Epicureans trace to Nature herself is not to be confused with Plato's theory that the soul is born already carrying latent, recollected knowledge of the Forms:

> Are we born already possessing some kind of awareness of the gods, albeit in a suppressed form, in the way that Platonists believe us to be born with latent knowledge of the Forms? That idea can be quickly eliminated as unacceptable to Epicureans: notoriously, the Platonist version of innatism relies on the hypothesis that the soul pre-existed its present incarnation ... a doctrine which cannot fail to be anathema to any Epicurean. — Sedley, "Epicurus: Theological Innatism"

Two systems can use the same word, "innate," and mean the opposite thing by it: for Plato, an inheritance from a prior, disembodied existence; for Epicurus, a natural imprint acquired by every mortal soul precisely because it has no such prior existence to draw on.

None of this was academic fighting for the sake of fighting. Each rejection cleared away a piece of the apparatus — the demiurge, the Forms, the geometrically ordered heavens — that Epicurus regarded as machinery built to manufacture oppression and the fear that sustains it. Taking that machinery apart cleared the ground for something better: confidence that the universe is fully within reach of the senses we actually have, and that a pleasant life is available now, not contingent on anyone else's cosmic plan.

## Canonics: The Rebellion Against Reason Enthroned

Plato's theory of knowledge is built around a hierarchy that runs, in the image of the Divided Line in Book VI of the *Republic*, from illusion and belief about the visible world up to true knowledge, which belongs to reason alone, contemplating the Forms. Sense-perception sits at the bottom of this hierarchy, capable at best of *doxa*, opinion, never of *episteme*, knowledge. The Allegory of the Cave in Book VII drives the same point home as a story: the senses show us only shadows on a wall, and only the philosopher who turns away from them toward the intelligible world — a strenuous and rare achievement — ever sees the truth.

Epicurus's Canon rejects this wholesale and turns it completely on its head. Sensations, anticipations, and feelings — not reason — are the tests of truth, and DeWitt is explicit that this was a targeted response, not an accidental parallel:

> The institution of the Canon reflects a contemporary striving for an increase of precision in all the arts... but the immediate provocation is to be found in the teachings of Pyrrho the skeptic and of Plato. ... In the judgment of Epicurus Plato also ranked as a skeptic, because he belittled the sensations as undependable and phenomena as deceptive, the only real and eternal existences being the ideas. — DeWitt, Ch. VII

Reason, for Plato, is what makes contact with reality possible at all; for Epicurus, reason has no such standing on its own:

> Not even reason can refute the sensations, for reason depends wholly upon them. — Epicurus, quoted in DeWitt, Ch. VII

DeWitt sums up the resulting split this way, noting that the Epicurean view is much closer to that of Protagoras than of Plato:

> In the terrestrial sphere Epicurus approximates to the position of Protagoras, who said "Man is the measure," while Plato said "God is the measure." — DeWitt, Ch. VII

This is not a small technical dispute - it is a wholesale transfer of authority from an eternal, incorporeal, divine Reason that only the trained philosopher or priest can access, to the sensations, anticipations, and feelings that every human being who is "not yet perverted" is equipped with at birth. It is also, not incidentally, an empowering of the individual: a Canon built out of universal human faculties needs no philosopher-king to certify it.

Even Martha Nussbaum, who generally favors Stoicism in her writing, reads Epicurus's insistence on this point as a conscious mirror-image of Plato's own position:

> Epicurus' insistence on this point amounts to an (probably deliberate) inversion of Plato, according to whom the only reliable witness to the end or good is the philosophical reason, purified of its bodily attachments by years of mathematical and dialectical training. — Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, 1994), Ch. 4

Nussbaum goes on to say:

> Epicurus finds truth in the body, whereas for Plato the body is the primary source of delusion and bewitchment, and clarity comes only from separating oneself, through intellect, from its influence. — Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, Ch. 4

Plato's wise man reaches truth by training the intellect to distrust the body's reports; Epicurus's ordinary person reaches truth by trusting them. Where one system asks for years of purification before the mind is fit to judge, the other asks only that a person pay honest attention to what he already feels.

The subject and use of Dialectic fits squarely within the Forms it was built to reach. If there is no eternal realm of Ideas to define and divide (the method of *diaeresis* that Plato practices at length in dialogues like the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*), then the entire apparatus of definition-by-division becomes motion without a destination:

> Dialectic they reject as superfluous, for it should suffice physicists to get along with the names of things as they find them. — Diogenes Laertius, quoted in DeWitt, Ch. VII

DeWitt points specifically to Plato's *Timaeus*, where categories like "Same," "Other," and "Essence" are elevated to the status of fundamental realities, as exactly the kind of abstraction Epicurus considered "sound without sense" once the Ideas behind them were denied. Cicero, no friend of Epicureanism, nonetheless preserved the proud epithet Epicurus used for his own Canon, calling it *diopetes* — "fallen from heaven" — the one standard that, unlike Plato's dialectic, requires no special initiation to use. As DeWitt wrote:

> With the leisurely meanderings of dialectic he had no patience. Truth, he believed, must possess immediate relevance to living. — DeWitt, "Epicurus: Philosophy for the Millions," *The Classical Journal* 42 (1947)

Dialectic, on this reckoning, is not simply built on an error about the nature of the universe. It is a method through which one can wander for a lifetime — as Plato's dialogues themselves do, for example circling a definition of justice or piety without ever quite landing on one — without ever touching the question that actually matters to the people discussing the question. For Epicurus, the

question for discussion is not "what is the correct abstract definition of the good," but "does this get me any closer to living well?" The contest is between dry intellectual assent (all too often enforced at the point of a gun or spear) versus the immediate impact of what your own feelings tell you to value. Epicurus comes down decisively on the side of the latter.

## Ethics: The Rebellion Against the Political Good

The field of ethics is where Plato most vigorously insists that we should assent to something we cannot feel. The Form of the Good, in Plato's system, is grasped by reason alone, at the summit of a long philosophical education most people will never complete and could not complete even if they tried. A carpenter, a farmer, a slave, or any person of ordinary means kept from philosophical training, whether by accident of birth or by central planning of the state — none have access to the Good on Plato's terms, only to opinions about it.

Epicurus starts from the opposite premise: whatever the good life is, it has to be something that nature communicates to us directly, beginning at birth when we are "not yet perverted" by false ideas, and not something reserved only for the philosophically credentialed. This is the difference between an abstract Good you must be taught to intellectually accept on someone else's authority, versus a good you already recognize because you *feel* its presence or its absence in your own life.

Plato's ethics cannot be separated from his politics. The *Republic* builds its account of the virtuous soul directly out of the structure of the ideal city, and both rest on division: reason, spirit, and appetite in the soul, mirrored by guardians, auxiliaries, and producers in the state, with the guardians further divided by the myth of metals into men of gold, silver, and iron. Appetite — the part of the soul responsible for bodily pleasure — is vividly denounced in Book IX:

> Model in words a kind of multifarious and many-headed beast that has, in a circle, all sorts of heads of tame and wild beasts and is able to change and produce out of itself all such growths. — Plato, *Republic* 588c–d

For Plato, this many-headed appetite is precisely what reason must rule and restrain. The desire for pleasure, left unchecked, increases without limit, which is one reason Plato denies that pleasure can serve as any kind of stable, self-limiting

good. Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice, Plato's four cardinal virtues, are all defined within this political and psychological context. DeWitt notes that this way of looking at virtue is inseparable from that context, "meshed alike with the division of citizens into men of gold, silver, and iron and with the tripartite division of the soul."[9]

Plato and Aristotle explain why desire runs to excess by pointing to upbringing: a soul trained from youth in the right habits keeps its passions moderate, while an undisciplined one produces the avarice or ambition of Plato's "timocratic man" in Book VIII of the *Republic*. Epicurus locates the same runaway desire somewhere else entirely — not in a failure of comprehensive training but in false ideas about the nature of things that leave a person without real confidence in how to secure a pleasant life.

If Plato is right that limitless desire comes from bad habituation, the fix is indeed a lifetime of supervision: the right training under the right teachers. These are available mainly to those with the leisure and station to receive it, or else imposed by force.

If the pain of limitless desire comes from false ideas about the nature of things, as Epicurus holds, the fix is available to anyone capable of trusting that the universe is fully natural, and who can use the same ordinary common sense that is all that is needed to learn to pursue pleasure prudently.

Epicurus takes a knife to the whole centralized enforcement structure. Pleasure is not the unruly appetite of Plato's beast but the goal itself — the single, unified end toward which every choice and avoidance is aimed, a point that is established not by philosophical argument but by watching what every newborn creature does before it has acquired any opinions at all:

> Every living creature, the moment it is born, reaches out for pleasure and rejoices in it as the highest good, shrinks from pain as the greatest evil. — Epicurus, quoted by Cicero, in DeWitt, Ch. XII, "The New Hedonism"

And where Plato's appetite craves more and more without limit, Epicurus insists pleasure has a natural ceiling, fixed by Nature herself and reachable by anyone regardless of wealth or station. DeWitt makes the target explicit:

> This was the fixed ceiling for pleasure, which he endeavors to establish in opposition to Plato, who compared the appetitive part of the soul to "a many-headed beast" and held to the opinion that desires increase endlessly and that pleasure defied the fixing of a limit. — DeWitt, Ch. XII

The rebellion goes deeper than the question of a ceiling; it reaches the very definition of what pleasure *is*. Plato, in the *Timaeus* and the *Philebus*, treats pleasure as a process of restoration — the motion back toward a natural state after some disturbance — and carefully separates that process from the neutral state of rest it restores, a state in which, on his account, neither pleasure nor pain is present. As Boris Nikolsky writes, this position lets Plato treat pleasure as always secondary to, and less real than, the settled state it merely leads toward:

> Plato and his followers meant by this only the process of restoration, separating this process from its result and believing that it leads to a neutral state, a state of rest, when both pleasure and pain are absent. — Boris Nikolsky, "Epicurus on Pleasure," *Phronesis* 46 (2001)[10]

Epicurus collapses that separation on purpose. He takes the very state Plato calls neutral — the absence of disturbance — and names it pleasure at its highest degree (because it is accompanied by no pain), not a third thing standing apart from pleasure and pain. There is no resting point left over for Plato's "neutral state" to occupy, because Epicurus has already claimed it for pleasure itself:

> The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures, and wherever a pleasant feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is no feeling of pain.[11] — Epicurus, Principal Doctrine 3 (fuller text)[12]

Plato needed to claim that the resting state is exempt from pleasure so that he could demote pleasure to a mere means, rather than an end worthy of a philosopher. Epicurus's whole ethics rejects that contention at its core.

Plato pushes the same demotion of pleasure one step further, into a claim about what actually deserves to be called real at all. Pleasure, he argues in the *Philebus*, is a *genesis* — a "generation," a process aimed at something beyond itself — and for that reason cannot be *ousia*, real "being":

> Then, as I said at first, we ought to be very grateful to him who first pointed out that pleasure was a generation only, and had no true being at all; for he is

> clearly one who laughs at the notion of pleasure being a good. — Plato, *Philebus* 53c–55a (tr. Jowett)

This is the same being/becoming distinction that drives Plato's physics, now aimed at ethics: whatever is merely "becoming" cannot be the good, because only what fully *is* qualifies. Cicero later turns the same weapon on Epicurus by name, casting pleasure as caught between being a *motion* (a process) and a *state* (something complete), as though Epicurus had to choose one and abandon the other. Epicurus holds both without contradiction: a pleasure is a motion when looked at as it unfolds, and a complete state when the whole of a life is in view, and Principal Doctrine 3 fixes the point at which it counts as complete — the removal of all pain.[13] The Epicureans' own image for that completeness was never Plato's static "being," but a *filled* vessel: Lucretius diagnosed the ordinary complaint about life as a "leaking" vessel that "could never by any means be filled full," and Diogenes of Oinoanda wrote that he wanted, before death overtook him, "to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure." Where Plato needed pleasure to fall short of being in order to disqualify it from the good, Epicurus just asks whether the vessel is full — a question anyone can answer from his own felt experience, without first settling a dispute about the metaphysics of Being.

The ancient commentator Damascius, writing on Plato's *Philebus*, recognized Principal Doctrine 3 as a direct rejoinder to Plato on a related point: whether pleasure and pain can occur mixed together at once.[14] As David Wolfsdorf notes in his survey, Damascius reads the two positions as flatly opposed:

> Epicurus thinks that pain cannot [simultaneously] mix with pleasure ... Plato, on the contrary, holds that this does occur, both in the soul and in the body and in combination.[15] — Damascius, *In Philebum* 197, quoted in David Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2013)[16]

restoration." Alternatively, the restoration of the complex may occur in such a way that all of the atomic constituents simultaneously, however gradually, return to their proper places. Let us call this "coordinated restoration." The fundamental difference between partitive and coordinated restoration is that in the case of coordinated restoration no proper part of the atomic complex will have been restored without the whole atomic complex having been restored. In the case of coordinated restoration, then, pain in principle exists until the process concludes, for at each point in the process until the terminus, the atoms constitutive of the complex are displaced, albeit to increasingly lesser extents. In the case of partitive restoration, pain in principle incrementally diminishes and pleasure, that is, absence of pain, incrementally increases as successive parts of the complex are restored.

Now, in his *Principal Doctrines* Epicurus explicitly says that pain and pleasure are exclusive:

> As long as pleasure is present, so long as it is present, there is no pain, either of body or soul or both at once. (3)

I take this maxim to entail that during restoration pleasure can only increase insofar as absence of pain prevails over an increasingly large scope of the body or soul. Thus, prior to its conclusion coordinated restoration does not entail increase in pleasure. In other words, only partitive restoration involves increase in pleasure during restoration. In short, for Epicurus, restorative pleasure is a misleading concept. Indeed, Epicurus never uses the phrase.

The Neoplatonic philosopher Damascius (458–*c.* 538), in his commentary on Plato's *Philebus*, appears to interpret Epicurus' *Principal Doctrine* 3 as a point of contrast with Plato's conception of simultaneously mixed pleasure:

> Epicurus thinks that pain cannot [simultaneously] mix with pleasure . . . Plato, on the contrary, holds that this does occur, both in the soul and in the body and in combination. (197)

But it must be emphasized that there is a crucial difference between Plato's conception of mixed pleasure and Epicurus' apparent denial of it in *Principal Doctrine* 3. Plato does not hold the logically impossible view that restoration and depletion – the core constituents of pleasure and pain – concur in the same bodily or psychic part. Rather, he holds that contrary processes occurring in distinct, if adjacent, parts register psychically in some sort of phenomenally unified, but nonetheless complex, way.

Plato's *Philebus* builds an entire class of "mixed" pleasures — the itch that is pleasant because it is also painful to scratch, grief mixed with the pleasure of a sad story — because on his view pleasure and pain can genuinely coincide. Epicurus's ceiling in Principal Doctrine 3 leaves no logical room for that coincidence: wherever pleasure is present in full, pain, by definition, is simply not there to be mixed in.[18]

Virtue itself changes shape under this pressure. For Plato, the virtues are intrinsically good, participating in and reflecting the eternal Form of the Good itself — the highest object of philosophical knowledge. For Epicurus, virtue is stripped of any such metaphysical backing and judged purely by what it does for a life. Virtue is not an end but an instrument, valuable exactly to the degree that it secures a pleasant life and worthless the moment it fails to. This is not a diminishment of virtue so much as a *relocation* of virtue — out of an eternal, otherworldly world of ideals and into the one life a person actually has to live.

Even Plato's belief that the soul exists before birth and might be recalling truths seen in a prior, disembodied state — the doctrine of *anamnesis* worked out in the *Phaedo* and the *Meno* — is answered point for point. For Plato this life in the body is itself a kind of confinement, a doctrine DeWitt traces to Pythagoras and never softened:

> [Plato inherited from Pythagoras] the belief that the body was a tomb or prison-house, which blurred the vision of reason and prevented perfection of knowledge. — DeWitt, Ch. I ("A Synoptic View of Epicureanism")

Epicurus's soul, by contrast, is born and dies with the body:

> There was for Epicureans no pre-existence, as Plato believed, and no afterlife, as the majority of mankind believed. — DeWitt, Ch. XII

The two positions could not generate more different feelings about being alive right now. If the body is a prison, then the pleasures felt inside it are at best a distraction from the soul's real business and at worst a further shackle. If body and soul rise and fall together, with nothing before and nothing after, then whatever a person feels in this one life — every pleasure secured, every friendship kept, every confidence earned — simply *is* the whole of what there is to value. Epicurus made this the actual test for identifying the good, rather than a further round

of definition-chasing. Rather than continuing to ask, in the manner of the *Republic*, what "the good" abstractly is, he pointed to the plainest fact of felt experience available: the sheer joy of surviving a mortal danger:

> That which occasions unsurpassable joy is the bare escape from some dreadful calamity; and this is the nature of "good," if one apprehend it rightly and then stand by his finding, and not go on walking round and round and harping uselessly on the meaning of "good."[19] — Epicurus, quoted in DeWitt, Ch. XII

DeWitt calls this "the summary cutting of a Gordian knot, the meaning of 'good,' upon which Plato had harped so tediously."[20] The test of the good, in other words, was never going to be found by further dialectic. It is already available by considering what a person feels the instant a real threat to what matters to him has passed.

## The Pleasure in the Rebellion

It would be easy to tell this story as a dry catalogue of disagreements — atoms against Forms, senses against Reason, pleasure against the Good — and stop there. But that would miss the point Epicurus was making, and it would repeat the reduction of Epicurean pleasure to small, momentary comforts, as though the whole system amounted to a preference for bread over marble columns. It does not.

Recall the distinction drawn at the outset of this article — between dry intellectual assent to a proposition and the impact of feeling in actual life — because that distinction is the real meaning of this dispute. Working through the case against Plato, chapter by chapter, physics through ethics, is not a detour on the way to Epicurean pleasure. It is a direct exercise of it, because false belief is rarely a neutral error of the intellect; it is the source of the deepest and most persistent hurdles to pleasurable living that a person carries. Confidence that the gods have no interest in punishing you. Confidence that death is simply the end of sensation, not a doorway to further suffering. Confidence that living well requires no credential you were never permitted to earn. All of this is exactly what false Platonic ideas take away. Seeing through each of these means coming to *feel* how important these issues are to our own pleasure and happiness.

There is another pleasure Epicurus was equally explicit about: the pleasure of knowing that clearing away a friend's false opinion has done that friend real, lasting good — not because he has been handed a better syllogism, but because he now feels differently, and better, about his own life. The ancient Epicurean writings such as the letter *Against the Philosophers in Mytilene*, Hermarchus's books against Plato and Aristotle, Metrodorus's satires against the "would-be Lycurguses and Solons" who kept reviving Plato's taste for law-giving — were not written to win debating points from rivals who would never be persuaded. They were written, as DeWitt observes, "to insulate the minds of disciples against all other doctrines," which is to say: to hand friends, present and future, something worth having in place of an inherited fear: confidence, gratitude, and the plain pleasure of trusting one's own judgment.[21] A refutation shared within the Garden was an act of care, aimed not at the friend's intellect alone but at what the friend would come to feel, every day afterward, about the things that actually mattered to him.

This is why "the pleasure of rebelling against Plato" is not a joke title dressed up for effect. It names something real and important in Epicurean ethics: that seeing through a false picture of the world is not a grim, humorless labor to be endured on the way to some separate reward called pleasure. It *is* a pleasure.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Part Six: Additional Topics

# Mind Viruses Cured By Epicurean Philosophy

Throughout history, philosophers, priests, and political authorities have promoted ideas about life, reality, and human nature that sound profound but are in fact deeply mistaken – and whose effect, whether intended or not, is to make ordinary people feel guilty, fearful, and dependent on outside authorities for guidance. These ideas spread from generation to generation the way a virus spreads through a population: not because they are true, but because they are repeated, because they serve the interests of those who promote them, and because they become so embedded in the culture that people accept them without examination. The Epicurean philosopher Diogenes of Oinoanda, writing in the second century AD, described this phenomenon with striking precision: "the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and their number is increasing – for in mutual emulation they catch the disease from one another, like sheep."[1] Epicurus himself had identified the most destructive of these false notions more than two thousand years ago and built a philosophy designed specifically to cure them – restoring each person's confidence in their own senses, their own feelings, and their own capacity to find happiness in this world, in this life, without fear of gods, death, or the judgment of others. The items below name twenty-nine of the most common and persistent of these mind viruses, and explain how Epicurean philosophy cures each one.

## 1. Nothing is real unless it lasts forever.

Epicurus cures this by grounding reality firmly in the nature of all things as emerging from combinations of atoms and void. Atoms themselves are permanent, but the things they form – including us, our pleasures, our friendships, and

the world we experience – are fully real even though they are temporary. Impermanence is not a defect in reality but simply the nature of how atoms combine and eventually come apart. Plato's demand that only eternal things can be truly real is itself the virus: it trains us to despise the world we actually live in and to chase phantom certainties that lie forever out of reach.

## 2. Nothing is true unless you have personally experienced it yourself.

Epicurus cures this by explaining how knowledge actually works: our senses give us reliable reports of the world, and from those reports we can reason carefully outward to things we cannot directly observe. Testimony, analogy, and reasoning from what we can see to what we cannot see are all legitimate paths to knowledge. This is how Epicurus could think confidently about atoms, the structure of the universe, and the nature of distant worlds without having visited them. Error comes in not when our senses report what they observe, but when we jump carelessly to conclusions that go beyond the evidence. The discipline Epicurus teaches is careful reasoning from what nature shows us, not a retreat into the claim that only personal experience counts.

## 3. No opinion is ever right or wrong – everything is equally valid.

Epicurus cures this by insisting that our senses provide a real and objective foundation for knowledge, and that opinions can and must be tested against that foundation. Some opinions are well-supported by evidence and some are not – that difference is exactly what distinguishes knowledge from guesswork. Epicurus was sharply opposed to the ancient philosophers of his day who used clever arguments about the fallibility of the senses to dissolve the very possibility of knowledge. He saw this as a kind of intellectual surrender that, taken seriously, would make it impossible even to evaluate the argument for skepticism itself. Truth is not a matter of perspective – it is a matter of how carefully we reason from what nature plainly shows us.

### 4. The mind is more trustworthy than the senses.

Epicurus cures this by reversing Plato's hierarchy entirely. The senses are the primary and non-negotiable source of evidence about the world; pure reasoning without sensory grounding is not a path to higher truth but a path to fantasy. Plato's philosophers learn to distrust what their eyes and hands tell them in order to ascend toward abstract invisible Forms – Epicurus treats this as the original philosophical error. Reasoning is a tool for processing and extending what the senses give us, never for overriding it; when an argument leads to a conclusion that contradicts what we plainly observe, the correct response is to reject the argument, not the observation.

### 5. Pleasure is suspect, and pain is ennobling.

Epicurus cures this by restoring "pleasure" – understood as all experience in life which is not painful – to its rightful place as the beginning and end of the happy life. This is the standard that nature itself gives us through the direct testimony of our feelings. Every animal at birth reaches toward pleasure and recoils from pain without any instruction: this is nature's own declaration about what matters. The idea that pleasure is morally dangerous and that pain builds the soul is a Platonic and religious distortion that has no basis in nature and enormous power to make people miserable. Epicurean pleasure is not a call to excess but a clear and practical guide: we choose and avoid on the basis of which path produces the greater good across our lives as a whole.

### 6. What you cannot see or touch cannot be the cause of anything.

Epicurus cures this through his physics, which shows that the invisible is precisely where causes originate. Atoms are too small to be seen directly, yet they are the underlying cause of everything that exists and happens. By reasoning carefully from what we can observe to what we cannot, we can understand causes that lie beyond direct perception. This is how Epicurus explained everything from weather to mental states to the formation of worlds. This also cuts against the opposite error: there is no reason to presume that invisible supernatural

forces are steering events, because nature explains itself through natural causes alone.

## 7. There must be a purpose behind everything that happens.

Epicurus cures this by removing the idea of cosmic purpose from nature altogether. Atoms move and combine according to their physical properties – not toward any goal, not in obedience to any plan, not guided by any designing mind. Lucretius drives this point home relentlessly: the world was not made for us, and the disasters, inefficiencies, and cruelties of nature make no sense as the product of a benevolent designer. The demand that everything happen for a reason is a holdover from religious thinking that, when frustrated as it inevitably is, generates enormous unnecessary suffering. Epicurus teaches us to find our own purposes within our own lives and relationships, which are more than enough.

## 8. Death is something that happens to you.

Epicurus cures this by showing that death is not an experience at all – it is the end of the very being that could experience anything. Where death is, you are not; where you are, death is not. There is no moment at which you and death coexist and death does something to you. The fear of death is therefore confused at its root: it treats the absence of a person as an experience that person will undergo, which is simply not possible.

## 9. The good life requires rising above the body.

Epicurus cures this by treating the body and its testimony as philosophically essential rather than an obstacle to be escaped. Pleasure and pain are felt in the body and reported to us as feelings – they are the raw data of the good life, not noise to be suppressed by a disciplined intellect. The Platonic fantasy of a soul that achieves its highest life by purging itself of physical sensation is, from an Epicurean perspective, simply a misdescription of what we are: animals whose good consists in the flourishing of the whole person, body and mind together.

## 10. Virtue is its own reward – happiness is beside the point.

Epicurus cures this by restoring the correct relationship between virtue and happiness. Virtue is not the goal; pleasure – understood fully and widely as all experiences of life which are not painful – is the goal, and virtues are the reliable means by which wise people achieve it. The Stoic and Kantian insistence that virtue must be pursued for its own sake regardless of consequences is, from an Epicurean standpoint, a pious-sounding way of cutting the connection between right action and human wellbeing. What makes honesty, justice, and friendship genuinely admirable is precisely that they work – they produce the good life.

## 11. The universe was designed with humanity in mind.

Epicurus cures this by showing that the universe is the unplanned product of atoms moving through infinite space over infinite time, in which countless worlds have formed, dissolved, and formed again – with no designer and no intended outcome. Humanity occupies no special position in this picture; we are one form of life among an infinity of forms, on one world among countless worlds. Recognizing that the universe was not arranged for our benefit frees us from the crushing anxiety of trying to read natural disasters, illness, and misfortune as messages or punishments aimed at us personally. The universe is not hostile – it is simply indifferent, and that indifference brings not despair but liberation.

## 12. The soul survives the body and will be judged.

Epicurus cures this by showing through his physics that the soul is a physical thing – a cluster of very fine, mobile atoms – and that it disperses when the body dies, just as smoke disperses when a fire goes out. There is no surviving self left to stand before any judge or to suffer any punishment after death. Epicurus identified the fear of divine judgment after death as one of the chief sources of human misery, and this physical account of the soul was his direct remedy. The entire structure of religious threats – heaven, hell, purgatory, reincarnation, divine retribution – collapses once we understand what the soul actually is and what death actually means.

## 13. Suffering builds character and makes you better.

Epicurus cures this by treating pain as a plain evil to be reduced, not a resource to be cultivated. Pain is, by the direct report of our feelings, something nature tells us to move away from – it has no positive moral content simply by virtue of being endured. The idea that suffering ennobles the soul is a Stoic and religious consolation that has been repeated so often it now passes as common wisdom, but Epicurus asks us to check it against experience. Does suffering actually produce better, happier people, or does it mostly produce people who have learned to rationalize their pain as meaningful? The wise response to unavoidable pain is to bear it calmly; the wise response to avoidable pain is to remove it.

## 14. The more you deny yourself, the more virtuous you are.

Epicurus cures this by making clear that the goal of living simply is to make pleasure more secure and reliable, not to maximize self-denial as an end in itself. Simple pleasures are often preferable to extravagant ones not because pleasure is bad but because simple pleasures are more likely to be easier to obtain, less likely to disappoint, and free from the anxieties that come with striving and ambition. Epicurus himself enjoyed the many physical and mental pleasures of running a large philosophical school and surrounding himself with numerous friends, properties, and household servants, and he wrote that he could compete in pleasure with any king – hardly the attitude of someone who thought deprivation was virtuous. Living within your means is a practical strategy for securing happiness, not a moral achievement in its own right.

## 15. If something feels good, it is probably bad for you.

Epicurus cures this by grounding the entire project of living well in the plain testimony of our feelings, which nature gave us precisely so we could find our way toward happiness. The idea that what the body welcomes is spiritually dangerous and what it recoils from is improving has no basis in nature and serves mainly to make people feel guilty about being alive. Epicurus does ask us to think carefully about pleasures that lead to greater pain and pains that lead to greater pleasure – that is wisdom, not suspicion of enjoyment. But the starting point is always that pleasure is good on its face and pain is bad on its face, and

any argument that concludes otherwise is the argument that needs to be questioned.

## 16. Logic and reason can override what your senses plainly show you.

Epicurus cures this by insisting that any argument whose conclusion contradicts clear observation has a flaw in it – full stop. This is not a rejection of careful reasoning; it is a recognition that reasoning has no independent window onto the world and must always start from what our senses actually report. Plato's proofs of invisible eternal Forms, the ancient paradoxes that "prove" motion is impossible, and every other chain of argument that leads to conclusions contradicting plain experience are demonstrations of errors in the reasoning, not discoveries about the unreliability of observation. When an argument tells you that your senses deceive you and that you should completely give up reliance on them, that argument is wrong.

## 17. There is a hidden world behind this one where the real truth lies.

Epicurus cures this by providing a complete natural account of the world that leaves no gap for a second, truer world to fill. Atoms and void account for the generation and dissolution of all things – matter, mind, life, sensation, and even the gods – and nothing lies "behind" this picture to explain it or complete it. The appeal of hidden-world thinking is that it seems to explain why the visible world is flawed and imperfect – but Epicurus' answer is that imperfection needs no explanation because the world was never designed to be perfect in the first place. What you see is what there is; the task is to live well in this world, not to escape toward another one.

## 18. Your life only has meaning if it serves something greater than yourself.

Epicurus cures this by locating meaning precisely where it can actually be found and felt: in your own pleasure, your friendships, your philosophical growth, and the quality of your daily experience. The demand that life get its meaning from

service to a nation, a god, a historical cause, or future generations is a recipe for deferring happiness indefinitely while sacrificing the life you actually have to a goal you may never see fulfilled. Epicurus did not dismiss the value of contributing to others – friendship and community are central to the good life – but the foundation is always your own felt wellbeing, which is what nature has equipped you to pursue. Meaning that cannot be connected to real human flourishing is not meaning – it is ideology.

## 19. Fame and the good opinion of others are worth any sacrifice.

Epicurus cures this by recognizing the desire for fame as one of the clearest examples of a desire that reliably generates more anxiety and pain than it ever delivers in satisfaction. Fame makes your happiness entirely dependent on the shifting opinions of people who mostly do not know you, in pursuit of goals that have no stable connection to what actually makes life pleasurable. The Epicurean alternative is genuine friendship within a community of people who actually know and value you, which provides real and lasting satisfaction. "Live quietly" was not a counsel of passivity but a recognition that public life is a poor trade for the secure pleasures of private life and close friendship.

## 20. The gods reward the good and punish the wicked.

Epicurus cures this by firmly establishing that the gods – which Epicurus affirmed exist as perfectly happy, undisturbed beings – take no part in managing the world or the affairs of human beings. The gods are models of the Epicurean good life precisely because they are completely free from the labor of running a universe and judging its inhabitants. The ideas of divine reward and punishment are projections of human anxieties onto beings who, if they are truly happy and undisturbed, could not possibly spend their existence monitoring and correcting human behavior. The practical result is direct: neither gratitude for good fortune nor terror at bad fortune need be directed at divine beings who could grant or withhold it.

## 21. The wise person has no desires and no needs.

Epicurus cures this by drawing a sharp line between his view and the Stoic or Buddhist ideal of the sage who has eliminated all desires and needs nothing from the world. The Epicurean wise person desires pleasure, values friendship, enjoys food and conversation and the life of a community of friends – he has simply learned to desire what is natural and achievable rather than what is empty and insatiable. Desires are good; they are nature's way of pointing us toward what we need. The goal is to understand and work with your desires, not to eliminate them.

## 22. You cannot trust your own judgment about what makes you happy.

Epicurus cures this by making your own direct experience of pleasure and pain the primary evidence in ethics – evidence that only you have access to and that no outside authority can override. The feeling of pleasure is not something you might be wrong about in the way you might be wrong about a historical fact; it is nature speaking directly through you. What you can misjudge is whether a particular choice will actually produce more pleasure than pain once all its consequences play out, and for that Epicurus offers the skill of thinking carefully about the full picture – not a hierarchy of priests, philosophers, or authorities who claim to know your good better than you do.

## 23. You cannot be happy until everything around you is perfect and secure.

Epicurus cures this by showing that friendship, a community of like-minded people, and a sustainable life are genuinely sufficient for happiness – and that these are actually within reach. The desire for total security is itself one of the chief sources of anxiety, because total security is never achievable and the pursuit of it drags you into exactly the kind of public striving and ambition that Epicurus identified as the main sources of human misery. Happiness does not require eliminating all risk; it requires building a life of happiness solid enough that even serious misfortune cannot wholly destroy it. Epicurus himself reportedly kept

his happiness while dying in physical pain, drawing on the pleasure of remembering a life of philosophical friendship – a practical demonstration of the point.

## 24. Everything happens for a reason.

Epicurus cures this by providing a complete account of events that requires no hidden purposes or intentions behind them – only atoms, space, and the natural properties of matter. Events have causes, but causes are not reasons; a cause is a prior physical state that produces a later one, not a purpose that some mind is aiming at. The search for hidden "reasons" behind misfortune – the earthquake, the illness, the early death – is an extension of the same thinking that imagines a designer behind nature. Epicurean physics dismantles both at once. Accepting that events happen because of prior natural causes, not because of intentions aimed at us personally, removes one of the heaviest and most unnecessary burdens human beings carry.

## 25. Wealth and status are the natural measure of a successful life.

Epicurus cures this by offering a clear and nature-based alternative measure: the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain, honestly assessed across the whole of one's life. Wealth and status are among the clearest examples of desires that, when pursued as ends in themselves, generate anxiety in proportion to the effort invested – because they are always subject to loss and always invite comparison with those who have more. The person who has learned to find deep satisfaction in friendship, honest conversation, and the pleasures of a sustainable life is, by the Epicurean measure, better off than any wealthy person whose contentment depends entirely on outside circumstances. This is not a consolation or excuse for accepting poverty – it is a precise diagnosis of why the wealthy so rarely achieve the happiness their wealth was supposed to deliver.

## 26. A life that does not last forever is not worth living.

Epicurus cures this by showing that the length of a life and the quality of a life are two entirely different things. As he states directly in the Principal Doctrines, "Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures by

reason the limits of pleasure."[2] The pleasure of a good meal is complete when hunger is satisfied; the pleasure of a deep friendship is complete in the living of it; neither of these is improved by being repeated forever. The demand for immortality as a condition of a meaningful life is therefore a confusion – it mistakes duration for value and treats the good life as something that can only be justified if it never ends, which is precisely the kind of thinking that prevents people from fully inhabiting and appreciating the life they actually have.

## 27. No matter how much pleasure I have, I always need more to stay satisfied.

Epicurus cures this by drawing a precise and liberating distinction between the removal of pain – which is the actual goal – and the endless addition of more stimulation on top of it. He states in the Principal Doctrines that "the limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful," and further that once the pain of want is removed, pleasure is not increased by adding more – it is only varied.[3] Once hunger is fully satisfied, you are not in a state that requires ever-larger meals to maintain your happiness; you are already at the natural limit of that pleasure. This matters enormously because the belief that pleasure is always deficient and always demands more to sustain it is the very engine of insatiable desire – the endless pursuit of wealth, novelty, and stimulation that Epicurus identified as one of the chief sources of human misery.

## 28. The pains of life will always make it impossible to be happy.

Epicurus cures this by showing first that happiness is not a moment-by-moment condition but a property of a whole life, and second that a whole life well-lived is fully capable of including pain without being destroyed by it. The question is never whether any particular day is free from suffering, but whether your life as a whole – looked at honestly from beginning to end – contains more pleasure than pain, and whether you are able to appreciate and enjoy that life as the complete thing it is. Just as a good day is not ruined by a difficult hour, a good life is not cancelled by periods of pain, and the mind has a remarkable capacity to draw on the entire span of one's experience – on the memory of past pleasures, on the pleasures of friendship and reflection available right now, and on the confidence that what lies ahead holds no terrors – in a way that can outweigh even serious

physical suffering. In the Principal Doctrines Epicurus states that extreme pain tends to be brief, and that pain which does persist over time does not typically hold its most intense levels for long. More importantly, Epicurus himself demonstrated the whole argument at his own death: writing in his final hours while in severe physical pain, he reported that the joy he felt in remembering his philosophical conversations with friends set itself against all of it. He was not claiming to feel no pain. He was showing that a life rich enough in genuine pleasure – built over years through friendship, thought, and the practice of living well – carries resources that physical suffering alone cannot take away.

## 29. Justice is absolute – the same rules should apply to everyone, everywhere, at all times.

Epicurus cures this by showing that justice is not a set of eternal rules handed down by a god from above but something that real people create for themselves through agreements made under specific circumstances. In the Principal Doctrines he states plainly that Justice as a single thing in itself does not exist in nature. What exists are agreements among people in particular places and times about how to avoid harming one another for their mutual benefit. This means that what counts as just can and does change as circumstances change: an agreement that served mutual protection under one set of conditions may need to be revised or replaced when those conditions shift, and clinging to old arrangements simply because they once worked is not justice but rigidity. The demand for a single, timeless, universal standard of justice – whether grounded in divine law, abstract reason, or natural right – is itself a source of harm, because it blinds people to the actual human purpose that justice serves and makes it harder to adapt agreements to the real conditions of real communities.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# In The Arena: The Locations of the Garden and House of Epicurus Refute the Recluse Myth

*It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly...*

— Theodore Roosevelt, "Citizenship in a Republic," Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910

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## Introduction: A Slander With a Long Life

Among the accusations leveled against Epicurus and his followers, few have proven more durable than the charge of reclusiveness. The Epicureans, the story goes, withdrew from civic life, refused the obligations of citizenship, and sealed themselves away from the world in a private retreat devoted to personal pleasure. The philosophical instruction to "live unknown" (*lathe biosas*) has been seized upon as a motto for this withdrawal. The very name "The Garden" has lent itself to the image of a walled enclosure, something private and bounded, set apart from the busy life of the city around it.

This charge is not just a modern misconception. It was being made in antiquity. Plutarch's hostile essay *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* ridicules Epicurus's mother for living to see her son "cooping himself up in a little garden." Cicero, whose philosophical sympathies lay elsewhere, treated the Garden as a

convenient symbol for a philosophy that had opted out of Roman public life. The slander has been repeated so often that it has acquired the texture of fact.

It is not a fact. It is a distortion, and one that can be tested against straightforward evidence. If the Epicureans were truly recluses who had withdrawn from Athenian society, we would expect to find their school located accordingly — far from the centers of civic activity, in some quiet suburb or rural retreat, difficult to reach and easy to ignore. What we find instead is the opposite. The Garden of Epicurus stood on the Dromos, the most celebrated ceremonial thoroughfare in Athens, on the direct route from the city's main gate to Plato's Academy. The house in which Epicurus himself lived was situated inside the city walls, west of the Agora, in a residential district so desirable that a prominent Roman politician sought the highest available legal authorization to build on its ruins two and a half centuries after Epicurus's death.

Far from hiding his school, Epicurus posted a welcome sign at its gate. He was, to borrow Theodore Roosevelt's phrase from twenty-three centuries later, a man in the arena — not a critic watching safely from the stands. This article takes its title from Roosevelt's famous formulation precisely because the charge against Epicurus is the charge Roosevelt identified: that the philosopher had chosen the comfortable distance of the spectator over the dust and sweat of engagement. The evidence of where Epicurus actually lived and taught gives that charge the answer it deserves.

The research that makes this argument possible was assembled by Don Boozer in his paper "Where Was the Garden of Epicurus? The Evidence from the Ancient Sources and Archaeology." Boozer's paper works through the ancient textual record systematically, evaluates the archaeological evidence along the Dromos, and calculates what the Garden's purchase price tells us about its likely scale. The present article takes Boozer's findings as its foundation and develops from them a sustained argument against the recluse myth — extending his analysis with a comparative look at where the other great philosophical schools of Athens actually stood, and what that comparison reveals about the charge that has so long been laid against Epicurus.

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## Part One: What the Charge Actually Claims — and What It Ignores

Before examining the evidence, it is worth being precise about what the recluse myth actually claims, because the claim tends to shift whenever the evidence pushes back against it.

In its strongest form, the charge is that Epicurus actively discouraged engagement with civic life — with politics, with education, with the public festivals and ceremonies that structured Athenian society — and that the Garden was the physical expression of this withdrawal: a community turned inward, sustained by private pleasures and philosophical conversation, indifferent to the city beyond its walls.

In a weaker form, the charge rests on little more than a comparison with the Stoics, who made a conspicuous point of locating their school in a public building in the Agora itself. By that comparison, any school with a private address could be called "reclusive."

Neither version survives contact with the evidence. The strong form collapses when we recall that Epicurus explicitly encouraged his students to participate in the civic festivals of Athens, maintained a welcoming entrance that invited passersby to enter, drew students from across the Greek world, and built a school that attracted visits from some of the most prominent intellectual and political figures of the Hellenistic period. The weak form collapses when we notice that the same comparison that supposedly makes the Garden reclusive also makes Plato's Academy — located even further from the city center — reclusive, as well as Aristotle's Lyceum, which also occupied a suburban gymnasium outside the city walls. If all three of those schools escape the recluse charge, there is no principled basis for applying it to Epicurus alone.

What distinguishes the case against Epicurus is not evidence but prejudice — the desire to use his school's location as confirmation of a philosophical caricature that was already in circulation. The actual locations of his properties tell a different story.

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## Part Two: The Garden on the Dromos — An Open House on Athens's Main Road

The most important piece of evidence for the location of the Garden comes from Cicero's *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (5.1–3), written when the Epicurean school was still a functioning institution, active under the scholarch Phaedrus. Cicero and his companions arranged an afternoon walk from the Dipylon Gate — the great northwestern entrance to Athens — to the Academy of Plato. Cicero notes that they covered six stades from the Dipylon while conversing on various topics. Upon arriving at the Academy, Cicero's companion Pomponius remarks that they had "just been passing" Epicurus's Garden (*quos modo praeteribamus*).

This casual observation is the key. The Garden was not a destination. It was something you passed on the way to somewhere else. It was interposed between the Dipylon Gate and the Academy — on the Dromos.

The Dromos was the principal ceremonial thoroughfare of ancient Athens. It ran from the Dipylon Gate northwest through the Kerameikos district to the Academy. As Boozer notes, in some stretches it was thirty-nine meters wide. It served as the route for the great Panathenaic procession, the path of the torch race that opened the festival games, and the everyday road connecting the city to one of its most celebrated institutions. Travelers, merchants, athletes, diplomats, students, and curious visitors passed along it constantly. There was no quieter address available in Athens that was harder to ignore.

When we then recall the welcome sign that Seneca preserves for us (Epistulae Morales, Letter XXI):

> *Hospes hic bene manebis, hic summum bonum voluptas est.* Dear Guest, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.

— the picture that emerges is not of a sealed private community but of a school that faced the public road, posted its philosophical position at the gate, and invited every traveler who passed by to come in. Boozer points out that the Latin *hospes* — and its Greek equivalent *xenos* — carried the full weight of the ancient

guest-friendship tradition: an obligation of hospitality extended to strangers as well as friends. Epicurus was not hiding his philosophy. He was advertising it on one of the busiest roads in the ancient world.

This is confirmed by the archaeological record. Working through Judith Binder's exhaustive posthumous sourcebook *The Monuments and Sites of Athens*, Don Boozer identified that a statue of a seated philosopher in Epicurean style was excavated at 54 Achilleos Street, with later finds at 61 Marathonos Street including two portrait statues of Epicurus himself and two statues of enthroned philosophers — all built into a Roman wall, all datable to the second and third centuries AD. As Boozer calculates, these finds are located along the line of the ancient Dromos, approximately 871 meters from the boundary of the Academy grounds. The site corresponds precisely with where Cicero's account would lead us to look. Five Epicurean statues in one location, two of the founder himself, placed exactly where the school's most public road frontage would have been.

Emperor Julian, writing in the fourth century AD, still associated Epicurus with "the gardens and suburbs of Athens" (*τοὺς κήπους καὶ τὸ προάστειον τῶν Ἀθηνῶν*, Letter to Themistius 259b) — the suburban zone along the Dromos, the same zone Cicero's group had walked three and a half centuries earlier. Even Heliodorus of Emesa, writing his novel *Aethiopica* in the third or fourth century AD, has a character arrange a meeting at "the garden where is the monument of the Epicureans" (*Aethiopica* 1.16, trans. Rowland Smith) as a recognizable landmark, casually assuming that any reader would know exactly where this was.[1] Six centuries after Epicurus established the Garden, it remained a landmark on a public road that the citizens of Athens still traveled.

This is not reclusiveness. This is civic presence on the scale of an institution.

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## Part Three: Scale Matters — The Garden Was Not a Private Backyard

One feature of the recluse myth is that it imagines the Garden as something small and intimate — a private enclosure just large enough to shelter a handful

of philosophical friends from the world outside. The evidence of the purchase price argues against this picture.

Apollodorus the Epicurean, writing in the second century BC when he served as scholarch and was personally responsible for the property, records that Epicurus purchased the Garden for eighty minae (Diogenes Laertius 10.10–11).[2] One mina equaled one hundred drachmas; a skilled worker in the fourth century BC earned approximately one drachma per day. Don Boozer's paper assembles comparative property values from the fourth century BC that put this figure in its proper context: a typical Athenian house in the mid-fourth century cost approximately thirty minae; a multiple-dwelling house was valued at one hundred minae or more; farm land sold in the range of twenty to thirty minae for plots of eight to thirteen acres. Livy records that a farm of seventy acres with a house attached sold for five talents — three hundred minae — meaning the land alone was worth two hundred fifty minae at about three and a half minae per acre.

Working from these figures, Boozer conjectures that the eighty minae most likely covered both the Garden plot and the house in Melite together.[3] If roughly fifty minae went to the Garden land at approximately three minae per acre, that purchases conservatively fifteen to seventeen acres — a plot Boozer compares in scale to the White House grounds in Washington, DC, more than large enough to grow food for a small resident community, to hold outdoor lectures under trees, and to accommodate guests from throughout the Greek world for extended stays.

This accords perfectly with what Apollodorus himself says in the same passage: "Friends indeed came to him from all parts and lived with him in his garden."[4] The Garden was not a retreat for a small closed circle. It was a substantial property that functioned as a school, a residence for a community, and a working farm — and it sat directly on the main road of Athens, visible and accessible to everyone.

Plutarch (Moralia 603B) notes for comparison that the Academy of Plato was purchased for three thousand drachmas — thirty minae. If Epicurus spent roughly fifty minae on the Garden land alone, his school occupied a *larger* plot than the Academy. The philosopher who supposedly fled civic life owned more ground than the philosopher who is never accused of reclusiveness.

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## Part Four: The House in Melite — Inside the City, Coveted by Rome

The Garden was the school. But Epicurus also lived somewhere, and where he lived tells us something equally important about his relationship to Athenian civic life.

Boozer draws attention to a point that is frequently overlooked: Epicurus did not own one property in Athens but two, and the Will makes the distinction explicit. The Will of Epicurus, preserved in Diogenes Laertius (10.16–17), specifies that the trustees are to permit Hermarchus and his philosophical companions to inhabit "the house in Melite" (*τὴν δ' οἰκίαν τὴν ἐν Μελίτῃ*) for the duration of Hermarchus's lifetime — a separate provision from the disposition of the Garden itself.[5] Norman DeWitt, in his 1940 paper "Epicurus' Three-Wheeled Chair," argued that this separation was practically significant: Epicurus commuted daily between the house in Melite and the Garden where he lectured, the two properties being sufficiently distant from each other to require deliberate travel between them.[6] The Garden was the schoolroom; the house was the residence. Melite was a recognized deme — a civic subdivision — of ancient Athens, situated immediately to the west of the Agora. John S. Traill's authoritative *Political Organization of Attica* places Melite's location with certainty from both literary sources and archaeological evidence: west of the Agora, within the city walls, in one of Athens's established residential districts. As Boozer emphasizes, this was not a peripheral location. The Melite deme occupied urban territory at the civic core of Athens. West of the Agora placed it close to the center of Athenian political, commercial, and social life — closer, in fact, than either the Academy to the northwest or the Lyceum to the east, both of which lay outside the city walls entirely. Epicurus's personal residence was more centrally located within Athens than the schools of either Plato or Aristotle.

The most compelling evidence that this was prime Athenian real estate comes not from Epicurus's lifetime but from 51 BC, when the Roman Gaius Memmius — the man to whom Lucretius dedicated *De Rerum Natura* — attempted to build on the site. By Cicero's time the house had fallen into ruin, almost certainly as a result of Sulla's devastating sack of Athens in 86 BC. Cicero describes

it dismissively as "some ruined house or other once belonging to Epicurus" (*nescio quid illud Epicuri parietinarum*).[7] But ruined or not, the site in Melite was desirable enough that Memmius had gone to considerable lengths to claim it.

As Oxford scholars Llewelyn Morgan and Barnaby Taylor established in their 2017 study "Memmius the Epicurean," Memmius had secured a formal decree of the Areopagus — the *hupomnematisnos* — giving him licensed authority to build there. An Areopagus decree was the highest local judicial authorization available. A prominent Roman politician, living in Athens as an exile after the failed consular elections of 53 BC, had applied to the city's supreme court to obtain rights over a specific piece of urban real estate. You do not go to those lengths for an out-of-the-way property.

Patro, the scholarch of the Epicurean school, mounted vigorous resistance. As Cicero summarizes Patro's appeal to Memmius: Patro "has to maintain his own honour and duty, the sanctity of a will, the prestige of Epicurus, the solemn injunction of Phaedrus, the home, the dwelling-place, the footprints of famous men" (*sedem, domicilium, vestigia summorum hominum*).[8] Even in ruins, the house in Melite was treated as a monument of civic and philosophical significance — significant enough to generate a legal dispute that required Cicero's diplomatic intervention and, ultimately, a formal reversal of the Areopagus decree.[9]

That dispute, spanning the correspondence of one of Rome's most prominent orators and concerning the highest judicial body in Athens, gives us the measure of what the house in Melite represented.[10] This was not the dwelling of a recluse. It was the founding address of a school that Athens's civic institutions recognized, protected, and contested across two and a half centuries.

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## Part Five: Comparing the Schools — Who Was Actually Less Engaged?

If we grant, as we must, that the Garden and house of Epicurus occupied central and publicly accessible locations in and around Athens, the next question is whether this distinguishes Epicurus from his contemporaries or puts him in their company. The answer is unambiguous: it puts him in their company —

and in one crucial respect, the location of his personal house, it makes him *more* centrally located than his principal rivals.

**Plato's Academy** lay approximately 1,300 to 1,500 meters northwest of the Dipylon Gate, outside the city walls. Plutarch records that Plato, Xenocrates, and Polemon not only taught there but lived there, leaving for the city only rarely — Xenocrates, Plutarch notes, came down to Athens just once a year, for the new tragedies at the Dionysia festival. The Academy was a residential philosophical community on grounds outside the city. By any geographic definition of "reclusive," Plato's school qualifies more fully than Epicurus's. No one calls it that, because the philosophical orientation of the school is taken to reflect civic engagement regardless of address.

**Aristotle's Lyceum** lay to the east of Athens, just outside the Diochares Gate, near the banks of the Ilissos river. It occupied a gymnasium that had served public functions for centuries — assembly meetings, athletic contests, open philosophical debate — but it lay outside the city walls. When archaeologists discovered its remains in 1996 during construction in what is now the Kolonaki neighborhood, they found it just outside what was then the eastern boundary of ancient Athens. Like the Academy, the Lyceum was a suburban educational institution on the outskirts of the city.

Aristotle further faced a civic constraint that Epicurus did not: as a *metoikos* (resident foreigner), he could not own property in Athens. He rented the gymnasium facilities. Epicurus, by contrast, purchased his properties outright as a recognized participant in Athenian civic and legal life. The Epicurean school was embedded in property law; the Peripatetic school was a tenant.

**The Stoa Poikile** of the Stoics stood at the northern edge of the Agora — in the marketplace itself, the undisputed center of Athenian civic life. Zeno of Citium began teaching there around 300 BC, and the school took its name from the building because it never owned anything more than a presence in a public colonnade. The Stoa was frequented by beggars, fishmongers, and entertainers alongside philosophers. As a venue for public philosophical instruction it was the most visible in Athens.

But notice what this comparison actually shows: the Stoics chose the Agora because Zeno had no property and no resources to purchase any. He used a public

building because that was what was available to him. The Epicureans, by contrast, owned a substantial property on the Dromos *and* a house in the Melite deme. The Epicureans were not less engaged with Athens than the Stoics — they simply operated from owned property rather than borrowed public space.

And if the comparison that supposedly damns the Epicureans is "the Stoics were in the Agora," we should note that the same comparison damns Plato and Aristotle with equal force. No one applies it to them, because for Plato and Aristotle the comparison is recognized as unfair. It should be recognized as equally unfair when applied to Epicurus.

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## Part Six: The Open Door — Active Engagement, Not Withdrawal

The geographic argument does not stand alone. It is confirmed at every point by what we know of who came to the Garden, how the school operated, and what Epicurus himself said about civic participation.

Apollodorus the Epicurean records that "friends came to him from all parts and lived with him in his garden" (Diogenes Laertius 10.10).[11] This was not a closed community. It was a destination for philosophical travelers from across the Hellenistic world — from Lampsacus, from Mytilene, from Egypt, from Asia Minor. The Garden was also, uniquely among the major schools, open to women — Leontion, Themista, and others are named in the ancient sources as active participants in philosophical conversation there. The gymnasia where Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics taught were, as a matter of Athenian social organization, effectively closed to women. The Garden was not.

Slaves were also welcomed. This was not incidental. It was a statement about who philosophy was for. Epicurus was not building a community for the Athenian elite or for those whose social position gave them access to the gymnasia. He was building a community open to everyone willing to engage seriously with the question of how to live well.

Epicurus also explicitly encouraged participation in civic festivals. He observed the traditional religious celebrations of Athens, celebrated the Twentieth (*Eika-*

*das*) each month as a community observance, and wrote warmly about the pleasures of social life, friendship, and shared celebration. The directive to "live unknown" was aimed specifically at the pursuit of political power and the vanity of fame — not at civic invisibility as such. You can decline to run for office while still attending the Panathenaia, welcoming visitors from across the world, posting a sign at your gate, and conducting an active correspondence with philosophers and students throughout the Hellenistic world.

The correspondence itself is evidence. Diogenes Laertius notes that Epicurus's output exceeded three hundred rolls, more than any philosopher before him — letters, treatises, summaries, responses to critics, philosophical exchanges with students near and far. This was not the output of a man sealed away from the world. It was the output of a man in constant intellectual engagement with it.

By the time of the empress Plotina's letters to the emperor Hadrian (121 AD), the Epicurean school in Athens was sufficiently established as a civic and legal institution that the empress wrote on its behalf, requesting that the school be permitted to make its will in Greek rather than Latin and to appoint successors from outside the Roman citizen body. Hadrian granted the request. The succession of a philosophical school in Athens was a matter of imperial policy. This is the opposite of civic withdrawal.

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## Part Seven: What "Live Unknown" Actually Means

The philosophical principle most often recruited to support the recluse myth — *lathe biosas*, "live unknown" — deserves direct attention, because it is almost always misquoted and misapplied.

The context of this Epicurean advice, as Plutarch (who disagreed with it) reports it, is the pursuit of political reputation. Epicurus was advising against the kind of life organized around public recognition, political office, and the pursuit of honor through civic achievement. He was not advising invisibility as such. He was warning that the ambitions of the political career — the endless competition for status, the dependency on the opinions of others, the vulnerability that comes

from tying one's happiness to public reputation — were incompatible with a life organized around genuine pleasure and friendship.

This advice is fully consistent with a school that posted a welcome sign on a major road, that welcomed visitors from all over the Greek world, that maintained a house in the center of Athens, and that observed the civic and religious festivals of the city. None of those things require political ambition. All of them are perfectly compatible with a philosophical community that engaged deeply with the world on its own terms.

Indeed, when we look at the comparison with the other schools, we find that none of them were organized around political engagement as such. Plato's students did not, as a matter of their schooling, hold office in Athens. Aristotle's Lyceum was a place of research and education, not political participation. The Stoics taught in a public building, but Stoic philosophy was no more an endorsement of political careerism than Epicurean philosophy. The real difference between the schools on this question is one of emphasis and framing — not of actual civic engagement.

The charge against Epicurus amounts to this: he said the quiet part loud. He articulated explicitly what the other schools practiced implicitly — that a philosophical life was not a political life. For this honesty he was and continues to be punished with the caricature of the recluse.

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## Conclusion: Geography as Refutation

The locations of Epicurus's properties in Athens are not biographical footnotes. They are evidence in a philosophical dispute. They tell us, concretely and precisely, what kind of relationship Epicurus had with the city around him.

The relationship was one of engagement. The Garden was on Athens's most traveled ceremonial road, between the city gate and the Academy, with a welcome sign at the entrance addressed to strangers. The house in Melite was inside the city walls, west of the Agora, in a district so desirable that it generated a legal dispute at the level of the Areopagus and the correspondence of Rome's most prominent orators. Friends came to the Garden from all over the Greek world.

Women came when the gymnasia turned them away. Slaves came when the gymnasia excluded them entirely. The Epicurean school operated under legal protections that the city of Athens and the Roman imperial government both recognized and enforced.

If Epicurus was a recluse, then so were Plato and Aristotle, whose schools were if anything further from the Athenian city center. If Epicurus was hiding from civic life, he chose an odd hiding place — directly on the road that every Athenian and every visitor walked when traveling from the Dipylon Gate to the Academy. If "live unknown" meant what its critics claim it means, he should not have hung a sign.

The sign is the answer. It was addressed to *hospes* — to the guest, the stranger, the traveler passing by on the Dromos. Epicurus did not post a philosophy for recluses. He posted it where the world could read it.

Roosevelt's man in the arena has his face marred by dust and sweat. Epicurus's welcome sign faced one of the dustiest, most traveled roads in the ancient world. He was not in the stands. He was not in a cave. He was on the Dromos, with the gate open and the invitation plain, in the middle of everything.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# What Paul Feared and Nietzsche Celebrated: Epicurus as the Philosophical Antichrist

The encounter is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17. Paul has come to Athens, the philosophical capital of the ancient world, and is disputing in the marketplace. A group of philosophers approaches him. Among them, Luke identifies specifically, are Epicureans. They listen to what Paul is saying and ask one another: *"What is this babbler trying to say?"* Others say: *"He seems to be a setter forth of strange gods."*[1]

This is the only passage in the entire Bible in which Epicureans are named. And it places them in direct confrontation with the man who, more than anyone else, shaped what Christianity would become. The confrontation was not accidental, and its stakes could not have been higher. As Norman DeWitt put it in *St. Paul and Epicurus*, what was being decided in that encounter — and in the decades of struggle that followed — was nothing less than a contest between two fully developed and mutually incompatible accounts of the universe and the human life within it. DeWitt named it with precision: *"It was the logic of the cross against the logic of the atom, an early phase of the long strife between science and religion. Epicurus himself became a sort of Antichrist."*[2]

The logic of the atom lost. And the consequences of that loss shaped the next two thousand years of Western civilization in ways whose full weight has not yet been honestly reckoned.

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## The Philosopher Christianity Could Not Ignore

It is impossible to understand why Epicurean philosophy was so threatening to early Christianity without first understanding how thoroughly it had permeated the ancient Mediterranean world by the time Paul began his ministry.

DeWitt documents in detail that Epicurean philosophy had achieved something no other ancient philosophical school had matched: it had become a genuinely popular philosophy — practiced not just by educated elites but by ordinary people throughout the Greek-speaking world and increasingly in Rome. The three centuries before the birth of Christ, DeWitt writes, had allowed "the whole coherent structure of Epicurean materialism" to be "built up and solidified and disseminated over the Mediterranean world."[3] When Paul traveled through that world preaching the new faith, he was not encountering a philosophically naive population. He was encountering a population many of whose members had already found in Epicurus answers to the same questions Christianity claimed only it could answer.

The structural parallel between the two movements was remarkable enough to be embarrassing. Epicurus had instituted the custom of composing epistles for colonies of disciples spread across the Mediterranean — one of his writings bore the title *To the Friends in Asia*, and it was in circulation for three centuries before Paul composed his epistle inscribed *To the Saints Which Are in Ephesus*. The Epicurean communities had long been accustomed to meet in private houses to perpetuate the memory of their founder, whom they revered as the discoverer of truth and a savior. DeWitt shows that Paul's innovations — the epistle form, the community assembly, the celebration of the founder's memory — were adaptations of existing Epicurean practice.

Most strikingly, DeWitt argues that the very name "Christian" was coined in Antioch specifically to distinguish the new movement from the disciples of Epicurus. The two sects were singular in the ancient world in being named for their founders. The disciples of Epicurus did not call themselves Epicureans — outsiders gave them that name. The disciples of Jesus did not call themselves Christians — outsiders gave them that name. DeWitt's inference: "this name was

coined for them to distinguish them from the disciples of Epicurus."[4] The rivalry between the two movements was recognized by the populace of Antioch from the beginning.

Paul could not ignore what he was up against. As DeWitt states plainly, the Epicurean ethic was "so superior and so widely acknowledged that Paul had no alternative but to adopt it and bless it with the new sanction of religion, though to admit his indebtedness to the alleged atheist and sensualist was inconceivable. Epicurus was consequently consigned to anonymity."[5] The most beloved devotional passages in Paul's letters — including the great hymn to love in First Corinthians 13 — carry the unmistakable mark of Epicurean influence. Paul borrowed the content and changed the source.

What he could not borrow, and therefore had to destroy, was the foundation: the atomic physics, the Canon grounded in natural sensation and feeling, the rejection of divine providence and immortality, and the insistence that this world — the world of atoms and void, of sensation and feeling — is the only world there is.

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## What Paul Said — and What He Meant

DeWitt's central thesis in *St. Paul and Epicurus* is that passages throughout Paul's letters that have seemed obscure to later commentators become clear when read as direct engagements with Epicurean philosophy. The most revealing is the passage in the letter to the Galatians (4:9) in which Paul warns his converts not to turn back to what he calls the "weak and beggarly elements."[6]

DeWitt's reading of this phrase is specific and documented. He shows that Paul's word for "elements" (*stoicheia*) was the recognized Greek synonym for atoms — used because, just as all words are composed of letters, all things were thought by Epicurus to be composed of atoms, and the word for "letter" came to stand for the smallest unit of matter. The passage is not about vague cosmic forces or elementary religious principles. Paul is sneering directly at the Epicurean atomic theory.

The specific insult — "weak and beggarly" — carries its own charge. DeWitt notes that the atoms had become notorious to Epicurus's enemies precisely because they were such insignificant things: the smallest particles imaginable, invisible, without quality or color in themselves. For enemies of Epicurus, what could be more absurd than to build an entire philosophy of the good life on such a foundation? Paul is deploying that traditional ridicule. The Galatians, in his account, had been liberated from their old beliefs and were being tempted to return to those "weak and beggarly" building blocks — the atoms — as the foundation of their understanding of the universe.

Paul's engagement with the Epicurean atomic theory continues elsewhere in the New Testament. DeWitt documents that the atoms are mentioned six times in the New Testament under the name "elements" — three times simply as "elements" and three times as "elements of the universe," an unmistakable recognition of the Epicurean doctrine that the universe consists of atoms and space.[7] The author of Second Peter, responding to the Epicurean claim that "the universe was the same as it always had been and always would be the same," retorts that God created the world and will destroy it with fire: *"the elements will be dissolved with fire"* (3:10) and again *"the elements will melt with fire"* (3:12). This is a direct theological counter-attack on the Epicurean claim that atoms are indestructible and the universe eternal.

The point of all this, in DeWitt's analysis, is that Paul knew exactly what he was fighting. He had organized his entire missionary program around demonstrating that the Epicurean system — Canon, Physics, and Ethics, all three — was false and that Christianity provided the true alternative in each domain. In First Corinthians 2, Paul sets up his substitute for the Epicurean Canon: not natural sensation and feeling as the criteria of truth, but spiritual insight as the gift of God. Against the Epicurean Physics, he insists that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in God" — a statement that presupposes, as its negative, the Epicurean teaching that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Nature.[8] And against the Epicurean Ethics, he adopts much of its content while changing the motivation from natural pleasure to divine grace.

DeWitt is careful to note that the question of exactly which Pauline converts had previously been Epicureans is debated, and scholars are right to apply scrutiny to

specific textual identifications. But the broader picture is not seriously in doubt: Paul was writing for audiences who knew Epicurean philosophy, in language that carried Epicurean resonances that the original readers would have recognized, and his theological program was systematically constructed as the counterproposal to Epicurean naturalism on every major point.

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## Nietzsche Sees the Same Thing From the Other Side

In *The Antichrist*, published in 1895, Nietzsche wrote a passage that crystallizes the historical situation with a sharpness that DeWitt's scholarly apparatus illuminates from the inside:

*"One has but to read Lucretius to know what Epicurus made war upon — not paganism, but 'Christianity', which is to say, the corruption of souls by means of the concepts of guilt, punishment, and immortality... Epicurus would have won; each respectable mind was Epicurean in the Roman Empire: and then Paul arrived."*[9]

The first sentence calls for close attention. Nietzsche is saying that Epicurus, writing in the third century BC — before Christianity existed as a movement — was already fighting the same spiritual disease that Christianity would later institutionalize. What Lucretius attacked in *De Rerum Natura* with such force and passion was not naive polytheism. It was the systematic use of supernatural fear — fear of divine punishment, fear of death as a transition to suffering, guilt imposed through supernatural moral frameworks, the devaluation of this world and this life in favor of something beyond — to keep human beings in a condition of unnecessary pain. That is precisely what Christianity, in Paul's hands, would erect into an institutional structure with global reach.

The second sentence — "Epicurus would have won" — is Nietzsche's recognition of what DeWitt documented: by the first century AD, the philosophically serious population of the Roman world had largely found its way to Epicurus. The momentum was running toward the natural philosophy, toward this world. And then Paul arrived.

Nietzsche does not treat this as merely unfortunate. He treats it as a catastrophe of world-historical proportions, the consequences of which he spent his philo-

sophical career trying to reverse. And elsewhere he is explicit about the vindication that his own century had provided for Epicurus: *"The awakening sciences have allied themselves point by point with the philosophy of Epicurus, but point by point rejected Christianity."*[10] The logic of the atom, defeated in the ancient world by the logic of the cross, had returned in the form of modern natural science — and had, point by point, demonstrated what Epicurus had claimed.

DeWitt captures the same confrontation from the other direction when he writes that in Paul's letter to the Galatians the clash of science and religion had "never been more neatly presented": *"Epicurus, representing science, finds the eternal in the atom, by the incessant motion of which all things are created aimlessly, though within the limitations of natural laws. As for history, it is the evolution of the unintended. Paul, representing religion, finds the eternal in God and by his power and intelligence all things were created and continued to be providentially governed."*[11]

The two positions are stated with perfect economy. Twenty centuries of intellectual history have been the story of their conflict.

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## Pleasure Is Not What They Said It Was

To understand what Paul was fighting and what Nietzsche was celebrating, it is essential to clear away what is perhaps the most persistent misrepresentation of Epicurean philosophy: the claim that Epicurus's appeal to pleasure was an appeal to ordinary bodily stimulation.

DeWitt addresses this directly in his preface to *St. Paul and Epicurus*: "His pleasures were not the pleasures of the flesh."[12] The ancient enemies of Epicurus constructed the charge of sensualism precisely because his ethic was "so superior and so widely acknowledged" — it took genuine effort to make it look merely self-indulgent. The charge was a weapon, not a description.

What Epicurus meant by the Feelings — the two criteria of pleasure and pain — was something far more fundamental. In DeWitt's formulation, the Feelings are "Nature's educators, her Go and Stop signals, by which she trains man and beast to recognize what is good for him and what is evil in his environment."[13] This

covers all levels of life simultaneously. The physical signals are obvious — hunger, pain, warmth, cold. But the Feelings operate, as DeWitt notes, "on both physical and social levels of life. For example, justice gives pleasure and injustice hurts no less than a blow or a burn."[14]

This is the key that the hostile tradition — ancient and modern alike — has systematically suppressed. Epicurean pleasure is not primarily about gratifying the body. It is about accurately reading what nature is telling you about your situation, at every level of experience. The pleasure of genuine friendship is a reading of the Feelings just as the pleasure of eating when hungry is. The pain of witnessing injustice is a reading of the Feelings just as the pain of a wound is. Nature has provided this faculty as the instrument by which every living creature navigates toward genuine goods and away from genuine harms.

Paul knew this. That is why his response to the Epicurean Feelings was not to dismiss them but to replace them with a different criterion entirely: not natural sensation and feeling as the guides to truth, but spiritual insight as the gift of God. In First Corinthians 2, Paul systematically erects what DeWitt calls "his new canon of truth, spiritual insight, in direct opposition to the famous canon of Epicurus."[15] The move is deliberate and precisely aimed. Paul does not argue that the Feelings are wrong. He argues that they must be superseded — that the criterion of truth is no longer what nature provides to every living creature but what God reveals to those who receive spiritual insight.

This is the deepest philosophical move in the entire confrontation between Epicureanism and Christianity. Everything else follows from it. If nature's feelings are the criterion — if pleasure and pain, operating honestly and clearly at all levels of experience, are the instruments by which you navigate toward genuine goods — then this world is where the genuine goods are, the natural life is the good life, and no supernatural authority can override what nature itself is telling you. If spiritual insight supersedes natural feeling — if what God reveals takes precedence over what your own nature reports — then this world is merely preparation, natural feeling is unreliable or even corrupting, and the authority structure of organized religion becomes both necessary and unchallengeable.

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## What Nietzsche Was Pointing At: Feeling Versus Rationalism

Nietzsche named his central concept the *will to power* — a phrase that has been almost universally misunderstood as a call to domination. What Nietzsche meant was something much closer to what Epicurus meant by pleasure: the fundamental orientation of a living creature toward its own full engagement with life. The will to power, in Nietzsche's usage, is the drive toward growth, toward the expression of genuine capacity, toward full engagement with this world rather than flight from it into abstraction, transcendence, or the false promise of a better world to come.

Nietzsche's definition of happiness in *The Antichrist* makes the connection explicit: *"What is happiness? The feeling that power is growing — that a resistance is overcome."*[16] Not contentment. Not equanimity. Not the philosophical distance from life that both the Stoics and certain distorted readings of Epicurus recommend. The *feeling* — nature's instrument — of genuine engagement, genuine growth, genuine forward movement against what life actually presents.

This is close enough to the Epicurean account that the parallel is not accidental. Nietzsche knew Epicurus well and admired him deeply, even when he disagreed about specific points. What both are identifying, from different angles and in different vocabularies, is the same fundamental orientation: this world, this life, these feelings, this natural existence is what matters. The flight from it — into Platonic Forms, into Stoic virtue as something above and beyond natural pleasure, into Christian transcendence of the "merely" physical — is the error that both were fighting.

The opponent is not primarily religion in the narrow sense. The opponent is the entire tradition that sets something above and against what nature has provided — the tradition that says feeling is unreliable, that sensation deceives, that the natural impulses must be transcended in favor of something that reason, or divine command, or some faculty superior to mere feeling, has determined to be the true good. Against that entire tradition — Platonic, Stoic, Christian, and eventually Kantian — Epicurus and Nietzsche are, in their different ways, mak-

ing the same fundamental claim: nature is sufficient. Feeling is the guide. This world is where the genuine goods are found.

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## Nature Over Reason: What DeWitt Saw in Chapter 7

Norman DeWitt, in the seventh chapter of *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, arrives at a passage that illuminates the deepest level of the opposition between Epicurus and the entire tradition that opposed him:

> *"The same priority of Nature over reason that predetermined the right kind of writing and rendered rhetoric superfluous eliminated dialectic... The effect of the doctrine that nothing exists except atoms and void was to deny the reality of Plato's eternal ideas. Thus dialectic, which was the avenue to comprehension of those ideas, became a superfluity... As a parting comment it may be stated that, when once Nature has been established as the norm, it follows logically that man should live according to Nature, but the Epicureans seem never to have followed this inference through. It remained for the Stoics to identify Nature with Reason and to make a fetish of living according to Nature. They believed her supreme teaching was to be found in the divine order of the celestial realm, where Nature and Reason were at one."*[17]

The last observation points to a deep irony in Western philosophical history. The Stoics appropriated the phrase "live according to Nature" and made it their central ethical maxim — and it is the Stoics who have been identified, throughout the history of philosophy, as the champions of living naturally.[18] But what the Stoics meant by Nature was Reason — the divine rational order of the cosmos, the logos that permeates all things, accessible to human beings precisely through their own rational faculty. "Living according to Nature" for the Stoics meant aligning your rational will with the rational order of the universe.[19] It meant transcending the natural feelings, not following them.

Epicurus established the actual priority of Nature over reason — Nature as the physical, sensory, feeling world that exists prior to and independent of any rational construction we lay over it. And it is this Epicurus — the one who refused to convert Nature into Reason, who refused to follow the inference through to a system of living according to divine rational order — whom Paul identified as

"the generation of this world." That phrase from Ephesians 2 carries the full weight of the confrontation: the Epicureans are "the generation of this world," DeWitt explains, *"because they deny the existence of any other than the physical world, and thereby deny the existence of a spiritual world such as Paul located in the heavenly regions."*[20]

To belong to "the generation of this world" is, in Paul's framework, the fundamental error. It is to have committed oneself to the wrong world — the natural, physical, sensory world of atoms and void — and to have denied the "true world" that lies beyond it. For Epicurus, this is not an error. It is the conclusion of honest investigation. There is no other world. The natural world, the world of atoms and void and sensation and feeling, is the only world. And a philosophy that grounds human life in that actual world, using the instruments that nature has provided — the feelings of pleasure and pain, the sensations, the anticipations built from experience — is the only honest philosophy available.

Paul could not allow this conclusion to stand. His entire program required a different world — a world in which this life is preparation, this world is fallen, and the genuine goods are available only through divine grace in a future existence. Against the Epicurean insistence that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Nature, Paul insists that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in God.[21] The directness of the opposition could not be more exact.

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## The Bridge and What Was Lost

One of DeWitt's most striking observations in *St. Paul and Epicurus* is that Epicureanism did not simply oppose Christianity. It functioned, in his analysis, as a bridge of transition — preparing the ground for the new religion even as it represented the alternative that the new religion had to defeat.

The parallels are extensive and, once seen, impossible to unsee. Epicurus was revered by his followers not merely as a teacher but as a "discoverer of truth and a savior." His communities met in private houses to commemorate his memory, just as the early Christians would. He instituted the practice of composing epistles for distant colonies of followers — epistles of instruction, encourage-

ment, and community building — that Paul would adopt as his own form. The Epicurean communities were organized around friendship and brotherly love, what DeWitt calls "an agreeableness of speech and manners" that made Epicurean communities attractive to the middle class and to ordinary people in ways that Stoic severity could not.

Paul borrowed all of this structure. And then he had to destroy the foundation on which it had been built.

The most remarkable example of this borrowing-and-displacing is the great hymn to love in First Corinthians 13. DeWitt shows that this passage — one of the most beloved in the entire New Testament — was composed in direct response to Epicurean philosophy and exhibits, in its very structure, the Epicurean method of "opposing the vice to the corresponding virtue."[22] Moreover, DeWitt demonstrates that the verse "Love beareth all things," rightly interpreted, enshrines four qualities of true love or friendship according to Epicurus. Paul took the Epicurean philosophy of friendship — the greatest instrument of happiness according to Epicurus — and transmuted it into the Christian theology of divine love, preserving the emotional structure while replacing the naturalist foundation with a supernatural one.

This is DeWitt's thesis in its most pointed form: *"It is an astonishing fact — and the earnest student of the New Testament will profit by learning to live with it — that the passages of Paul's Epistles which we most prefer as devotional readings exhibit the most influence of Epicurus."*[23]

What was lost in this transmutation was the foundation — the insistence that these goods (love, friendship, community, genuine care for one another) are natural goods, available in this world, not gifts of divine grace that require supernatural sanction. Paul kept the goods and changed their source. Where Epicurus had said: nature provides these goods and the natural human being who follows nature honestly will find them — Paul said: God provides these goods through grace and faith in the resurrected Christ. The emotional content survived. The naturalist grounding was destroyed.

## The Mob Against the Space Gun

H.G. Wells, who wrote the screenplay for the 1936 film *Things to Come* with full creative control, gave the role of the principal antagonist to a sculptor named Theotocopulos — played by Cedric Hardwicke. Theotocopulos leads the mob that attempts to destroy the Space Gun and stop the first crewed mission to the moon. The exchange between him and Cabal, shouted across a vast space through amplifiers as the launch clock runs down, is one of the most compressed and direct statements of the ancient conflict in twentieth-century popular culture.

When Cabal confronts the mob and asks what they want, Theotocopulos answers directly: they want to save the young people from "inhuman foolery," to "make the world safe for men," to destroy the gun. Cabal responds that he and those with him have a right to do what they like with their own lives — "with our sort of lives." And then Theotocopulos delivers the passage that should be heard in full:

*"How can we do that when your science and inventions are perpetually changing life for us — when you are everlastingly rebuilding and contriving strange things about us? When you make what we think great, seem small. When you make what we think strong, seem feeble. We don't want you in the same world with us. We don't want this expedition. We don't want mankind to go out to the moon and the planets. We shall hate you more if you succeed than if you fail. Is there never to be rest in this world?"*[24]

Every sentence of this is the voice of the anti-Epicurean tradition distilled to its essence.

*"When you make what we think great, seem small."*[25] This is the deepest charge. The Epicurean analysis of the universe — that it consists of atoms and void, that the gods do not intervene in human affairs, that death is the end of sensation and not a passage to judgment, that the life aimed at pleasure in this world is the best life available — makes small what the anti-Epicurean tradition has declared great: the divine, the transcendent, the eternal soul, the supernatural order of things. This is exactly what Paul was fighting when he called the atoms "weak and beggarly." They were beggarly because they were too small — too insignificant, too

material, too natural — to serve as the foundation of a world that needed something more.

*"When you make what we think strong, seem feeble."*[26] The strength of the supernatural tradition — its capacity to command through the promise of divine reward and the threat of divine punishment — is exactly what the Epicurean analysis dissolves. Honest investigation of what the universe actually is leaves no room for gods who reward and punish. The power that rested on that foundation becomes, in the Epicurean light, exactly what Theotocopulos describes: strong-seeming, but feeble underneath.

*"We don't want you in the same world with us."*[27] This is the sentence that makes explicit what Paul's program required. The Epicurean and the Christian could not share a world — not because they failed to get along personally, but because their accounts of what the world actually is were mutually exclusive. An honest naturalist who takes the Epicurean analysis seriously makes the supernatural framework look exactly as Theotocopulos describes: its greatness diminished, its strength revealed as something less than it claimed. The two worldviews cannot coexist on equal terms. One must defeat the other. Paul understood this. His entire program was built on the recognition that the Epicurean account — if allowed to stand — left no room for the world he was trying to build.

*"We shall hate you more if you succeed than if you fail."*[28] This is the most honest sentence in the speech. Theotocopulos is not arguing that the Epicurean project will fail. He fears it will succeed. The hatred is not of failure but of success — because success would mean the definitive demonstration that the natural world, explored and understood honestly on its own terms, is sufficient. It would mean the world the anti-Epicurean tradition declared insufficient turning out to be enough after all. This is exactly what Nietzsche was celebrating when he wrote that the awakening sciences had allied themselves point by point with Epicurus while rejecting Christianity point by point.

Cabal's answer is Epicurean to its core: *"Rest enough for the individual man — too much, and too soon — and we call it death. But for Man, no rest and no ending."*[29] He is not arguing for collective human destiny in the abstract. He is arguing against the sufficiency of rest — against the claim that what we already have is enough, that the world as it is can be declared complete, that no further

reaching is warranted. The Epicurean who takes seriously that there is one life and it is finite does not respond to that recognition with rest. They respond with the urgency of someone who knows the time is not unlimited.

The mob that follows Theotocopulos toward the Space Gun is the same mob that followed Paul's appeal against the Epicureans in Antioch and Athens and Thessalonica. Different centuries, different vocabulary, same impulse: stop the people who are trying to live fully in the only world there is, and drag everyone back toward the claim that something warmer, greater, and stronger lies elsewhere — a claim whose apparent strength dissolves the moment the natural world is honestly examined.

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## Humanism: Christianity's Shadow

The relationship between Epicurean philosophy and the tradition it opposed does not exhaust itself with ancient Christianity. It has a modern continuation that is, if anything, more difficult to recognize because it wears a secular face.

Humanism, in most of its modern forms, presents itself as the rationalist, secular alternative to religious tradition. It rejects the supernatural. It does not invoke divine command. It grounds ethics in human reason and human dignity rather than in revelation. It seems, from the outside, like the natural ally of Epicurean philosophy against the religious tradition both have opposed.

This alliance is an illusion. Humanism, examined carefully, is Christianity with the God removed — and with everything else left in place. The ethics of universal duty, of unconditional obligations to all of humanity regardless of personal relationship, of the equal dignity of all persons as the non-negotiable foundation of moral reasoning — these are not conclusions that the Epicurean framework reaches. They are conclusions that the Christian moral tradition reached, and that Humanism has inherited and secularized. The frame is Kantian (and Kant, as Nietzsche insisted and as the *Twilight of the Idols* demonstrates, was a Platonist who happened to be writing in a secular age). The content is the Christian ethics of universal love and equal dignity, drained of its supernatural grounding and maintained on a purely rational basis.

Epicurus does not offer universal obligations. He offers a framework for identifying and pursuing genuine goods — goods that are genuinely yours, genuinely satisfying to the person you actually are, genuinely worth the costs they impose. His ethics is particular, personal, and grounded in what nature has actually provided rather than in what reason has determined all rational beings must acknowledge. This is not a deficiency of the Epicurean framework. It is its virtue. It is what makes it the genuine alternative to the tradition that has dominated Western ethics for two thousand years — not a variation on that tradition, as Humanism is, but a genuinely different starting point and a genuinely different destination.

The Humanist who rejects the supernatural while maintaining the universalist moral framework has done half the work of liberation and stopped. The Epicurean has done it all the way through: rejected the supernatural, the universalist ethics, the rational-divine order, the devaluation of the natural world and natural feeling, and returned to the actual foundation — nature, feeling, this world, this life, the genuine goods available to a living creature who takes its own experience honestly as the standard.

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## The True World and This World

Nietzsche, in *Twilight of the Idols*, traced the history of what he called "the true world" — the claim that reality as sensation and experience present it is merely appearance, and that the genuine reality lies elsewhere: in Plato's Forms, in the Christian heaven, in the Kantian thing-in-itself. The entire history of Western philosophy, on Nietzsche's account, is the history of the elaboration and defense of this claim — the claim that this world, the world we actually inhabit and experience, is not the real one.

Epicurus is the great exception. He is the philosopher who said, from the beginning: this world is the real world. What sensation reports is what is real. What feeling delivers is the genuine standard. There is no other world — no Forms, no heaven, no thing-in-itself inaccessible to experience. The universe is atoms and void. Life is sensation. The goal is pleasure — the genuine pleasure that honest

attention to nature's instruments delivers — and it is available here, now, to anyone willing to look honestly at what actually satisfies.

This is why Epicurus is, in the deepest philosophical sense, the Antichrist. Not in the sense of being evil or demonic — a charge that reflects the fears of those who needed the "true world" to be real and who recognized that Epicurus's arguments, if accepted, would dissolve it. But in the sense of representing the direct and complete philosophical alternative to everything that the "true world" tradition — Platonic, Stoic, Christian, Kantian — has stood for.

Paul understood this. He fought it. Nietzsche understood it. He celebrated it. The question that remains is whether we — in an age when the scientific picture of the world has confirmed, point by point, the Epicurean naturalist conclusions that Paul fought and Nietzsche celebrated — are willing to follow that recognition through to its practical consequences.

The atoms are not "weak and beggarly." They are the foundation of the only world there is. The feelings nature has provided are not to be transcended. They are the instruments by which the only life we have is to be lived. And the genuine pleasures available in this world, pursued with honest judgment and the wisdom that Epicurus spent his life developing, are not a poor substitute for something better. They are the thing itself.

Epicurus would have won. He still should.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# In Troubled Times, Why Young People Should Turn To Epicurus Rather Than To The Pope

*A friendly but direct word to young people searching for solid ground and thinking they might find it in the old but newly trendy Catholic Church*

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Something is stirring among young people in the West, and it deserves to be taken seriously rather than dismissed. Bookstores, podcasts, and university campuses are buzzing with a renewed interest in traditional religion – and in particular, in Catholicism. Authors like Scott Hahn, Robert Barron, Trent Horn, and Matthew Kelly are reaching a generation that feels, with good reason, that other religious and secular institutions of the past several decades have failed them. They are not wrong to feel that way. They are not wrong to want something more durable, more serious, and more demanding than the shallow therapeutic culture that was handed to them. They are not wrong to reject a world that offered them streaming platforms and antidepressants in place of genuine community and genuine meaning.

But there is a profound irony in the direction many of them are turning. The Catholic Church, which presents itself as the answer to modernity's failures, was not a passive bystander to those failures. It was, in important respects, their architect. And the philosophical tradition it has historically worked hardest to suppress and discredit – Epicurean philosophy – turns out to be precisely the tradition best equipped to give young people what they are actually looking for: a grounded, honest, courageous, and genuinely fulfilling way of living in this world.

This article makes that case. It does so without contempt for those who find themselves drawn toward the Catholic Church, and without any desire to mock sincere religious belief. But it does so firmly, because the stakes are real, and because Epicurus himself would have recognized the moment we are living through as one he understood very well.

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## The Moment We Are In

Josh Hawley, the senator from Missouri, published a book in 2023 called *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs*. Whatever one thinks of Hawley's politics, the book is a revealing cultural document. It explicitly attacks Epicurus by name – which is itself remarkable, since it is unusual for a sitting senator's self-help book to bother refuting a Greek philosopher who died in 270 BC. Hawley accuses Epicurus of promoting withdrawal, passivity, and the pursuit of mere personal pleasure at the expense of civic virtue and masculine engagement with the world. He presents the Catholic-Stoic tradition of virtue – suffering, sacrifice, duty, engagement in the great struggle – as the antidote to Epicurean softness.

Hawley's attack on Epicurus is not original. It is a version of an argument that has been made, in various forms, for the better part of two thousand years – ever since the Church identified Epicurean philosophy as one of its most dangerous competitors and set about discrediting it. The charge is always roughly the same: Epicurus taught people to care only about their own pleasure, to withdraw from civic life, to avoid discomfort, and to deny the existence of the gods and the immortal soul. All of these charges are, at best, distortions. At worst, they are deliberate fabrications. And the fact that they are still being repeated in 2023 by a prominent politician tells us something important about how thoroughly the Church's long campaign against Epicurus has succeeded – and how badly the truth about Epicurus needs to be recovered.

The books being recommended to young people interested in Catholicism today – Hahn's *Rome Sweet Home* and *The Lamb's Supper*, Barron's *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith*, Horn's *The Case for Catholicism*, Kelly's *Rediscover Catholicism*, Curtis Martin's *Made for More*, Thomas Joseph White's *The*

*Light of Christ* – are all, whatever their individual merits, built on the same foundational assumptions: that there is a supernatural God who created the universe with a purpose, that human beings have an immortal soul that will be judged after death, that there are absolute moral rules derived from divine authority, and that the Catholic Church is the institution uniquely authorized to transmit and interpret these truths. These are precisely the assumptions that Epicurus spent his life carefully, methodically, and compassionately dismantling.[2]

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## The Ancient Parallel

It is worth pausing on Hawley's implicit comparison – between our moment and the troubled times that preceded the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The parallel is more apt than Hawley intends, but the lesson to be drawn from it is the opposite of the one he draws.

The ancient world in the centuries around the birth of Christianity was indeed a time of extraordinary turmoil. The Roman Republic had collapsed into civil war. The Empire that replaced it brought external stability but internal anxiety – a vast, anonymous, multicultural machine in which traditional sources of meaning (the small community, the ancestral religion, the coherent civic life) had been disrupted or destroyed. Into this vacuum poured a bewildering array of competing mystery cults, philosophical schools, and religious movements – Mithraism, the cult of Isis, Neoplatonism, various Jewish sects, and eventually Christianity. All of them were offering something similar: a deeper meaning, a connection to something transcendent, a community of fellow-believers, a promise of something better than what the world immediately offered.

Epicurean philosophy was one of the serious alternatives in this competition, and for several centuries it held its own. The Epicurean communities scattered across the Mediterranean world – communities of friends, including men and women, slaves and free citizens, gathered to study and practice philosophy together – were in many ways remarkable anticipations of what people today are

2. As Nietzsche wrote in his *Anti-Christ*, Lucretius and through him Epicurus were campaigning against these ideas even before the emergence of the Catholic Church.

looking for when they look to intentional religious community. But Epicureanism had one decisive disadvantage in the competition for hearts and minds in a frightened age: it refused to lie. It would not promise an afterlife. It would not promise divine protection. It would not promise that suffering had a cosmic purpose. And it would not – this was perhaps its most important refusal – promise that there was an authority, a Pope, a Church, a priest, a sacred text, to whom you could surrender the burden of thinking for yourself.

The Church won that competition, in part, by suppressing the competition. Epicurus's thirty-seven volumes of *On Nature* were not lost by accident. The systematic destruction of Epicurean literature, the slander of Epicurus's character (the Church fathers accused him of gluttony, drunkenness, and depravity), and the centuries-long campaign to associate his name with crude hedonism – all of this was deliberate and largely successful. When Thomas Aquinas incorporated Aristotle into Catholic theology in the thirteenth century, he was careful to exclude Epicurus. When the Church encountered the rediscovery of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* in the fifteenth century, it responded with deep alarm. The poem's argument that the universe was made of atoms and void, that the soul was mortal, that the gods were indifferent to human affairs, and that the pursuit of pleasure was the natural and rational goal of life – all of this was recognized, correctly, as a profound challenge to the entire Catholic worldview.

We are in a similar moment now. The institutions that were supposed to give meaning – secular liberalism, conservatism, consumerism, social media, the therapeutic culture, the university as traditionally conceived – have failed. Young people are right to look for something better. The question is whether they should look to the institution that spent two thousand years destroying the alternative, or whether they should look to the alternative itself.

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## What Epicurus Actually Taught

Before making the positive case, it is worth clearing away the slanders, because they are still everywhere – including, implicitly, in Hawley's book and explicitly in most Catholic apologetics.

First, let's address the elephant in the room: how can anyone suggest that something as apparently superficial as "pleasure" is a preferred alternative to the sublime offerings of a church? The answer is that when Epicurus spoke of Pleasure he meant something very different from what his detractors claim. Just as Epicurus divided the entire physical universe between matter and void, he divided all human feelings into those which are felt to be desirable – pleasure – and those which are undesirable – pain. This includes not only the body but also the mind, especially since mental feelings are often more significant to us than bodily feelings. Detractors and misguided commentators fail to see what the ancients clearly understood – that when Epicurus spoke of Pleasure he was speaking of Nature's "go" signal in *every* aspect of life, not always or even primarily the momentary pleasures of the body.

Epicurus did not teach that we should pursue every pleasure and avoid every discomfort. He taught that pleasure is the natural guide given to us by nature – that every living creature reaches toward pleasure and recoils from pain at birth, before any instruction or conditioning, and that this is nature's own declaration about what matters. But he was careful to distinguish between pleasures that lead to greater pain and pleasures that do not, pointing instead to a contextual scale where natural and necessary (for food, companionship, understanding) come first, then followed by desires that natural but unnecessary (such as fine food, physical comfort), and those desires which are impossible of attainment by definition (such as for unlimited fame, power, and wealth). Epicurus' own life displayed the proper proportionment of these goals, combining ownership of significant property, pursuit of an active life of writing and philosophical lecturing, and leadership of a numerous school of students, all guided by common sense sustainability that inspired Philodemus, a later Epicurean, to write a wide-ranging series of books on engagement with society, including one on Household Management.

Epicurus did not teach withdrawal from life in the sense of passivity or cowardice. The injunction to "live quietly" (*lathe biosas*) was not an instruction to be a doormat. It was a recognition – entirely borne out by the history of the Roman Republic's collapse – that entanglement in political ambition and public competition for status was among the most reliable ways to make yourself and everyone around you miserable. The Epicurean communities were not monas-

teries of disengagement. They were active, intellectually serious, socially diverse communities engaged in the demanding project of understanding the universe and living well within it.

And Epicurus did not deny that the gods exist. He affirmed the existence of divine beings – blessed, immortal, perfectly happy – but insisted that these beings were entirely natural, took no interest in human affairs, and neither rewarded virtue nor punished vice. This was not atheism in the modern sense, but it was something more disturbing to religious authorities than outright denial: the argument that we need not fear the gods, and that the entire apparatus of priestly mediation, sacrifice, prayer, and supernatural bargaining was based on a false premise.

The three great fears that Epicurus identified as the sources of most human misery were: the fear of the gods, the fear of death, and the fear that following nature alone is insufficient for happiness. His philosophy was designed, with great care and compassion, to cure all three. This is what Diogenes of Oinoanda, a wealthy Epicurean of the second century AD, meant when he carved his vast philosophical inscription on a wall in what is now Turkey – he wanted passersby to receive the medicine of Epicurean philosophy whether they sought it or not, because he saw the world suffering from a plague of false beliefs from which he had been cured.

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## The Physical Foundation: Nature Without Supernatural Design

The deepest reason why Epicurean philosophy is more sound than Catholicism is not an ethical argument but a physical one. Epicurus, building on the atomism of Democritus and anticipating in remarkable ways the picture that modern science has confirmed, argued that the universe is entirely natural: composed of atoms and void, operating without supernatural direction, without cosmic purpose, without a designing intelligence. Worlds form and dissolve through the motion of atoms across infinite space and infinite time. Humanity occupies no privileged position in this picture. The universe was not made for us.

This is not the type of consoling picture that Catholicism claims to provide. It offers no promise that suffering has a purpose, no assurance that the good will be rewarded and the wicked punished, no guarantee that the universe cares about you personally. But it has two enormous advantages over the Catholic picture. First, it is true – or at least, it is consistent with everything that science has discovered in the centuries since Epicurus, including the atomic theory, the vast indifferent scale of the cosmos, the naturalistic origins of life, and the physical basis of mind and consciousness. Second, and perhaps more importantly for the present argument, it is liberating. Once you understand that the universe is not a theater in which your suffering serves a divine script, you stop waiting for cosmic justice and start focusing on the actual sources of happiness and unhappiness in your actual life.

Thomas Jefferson understood this. He wrote of himself "I too am an Epicurean," and described Epicurean philosophy as "the most rational system remaining from Greece and Rome."[1] Jefferson saw, as many of the American Founders did, that a free republic could not be built on the foundation of supernatural authority, and that the Epicurean picture of nature – rational, orderly, comprehensible by reason, without arbitrary divine intervention – was the natural philosophy of a free people.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who could hardly be accused of being a sentimentalist, was equally clear about the significance of Epicurus. He described Epicurus as one of the most admirable figures in all of human history – a man who had understood, centuries before Nietzsche himself arrived at the same conclusion, that "the true world" – the Platonic-Christian realm of ideal forms, divine purposes, and supernatural realities – did not exist, and that the recovery of this world, the natural world, as the only and sufficient world, was among the most important philosophical tasks any person could undertake. Nietzsche's "death of God" was in some ways simply a restatement of what Epicurus had argued: that the gods are not governors of human life, that the fear of divine punishment is among the most destructive of all human emotions, and that the affirmation of natural life – joyful, mortal, embedded in the actual world – is a higher achievement than the ascetic renunciation that Christianity demands.

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## On the Soul, Death, and What Comes After

The promise of eternal life is perhaps the most powerful thing the Catholic Church offers, and it is important to engage with it honestly rather than dismissively. The fear of death is real. The grief of losing people we love is real. The desire for some form of continuity beyond the brutal fact of biological extinction is not irrational – it is deeply human.

But Epicurus's argument about death is not a cold denial of its significance. It is one of the most carefully reasoned and, once understood, genuinely liberating arguments in the entire history of philosophy. His argument is simple: "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist."[2] The fear of death treats the absence of experience as a form of experience – as if death were something that would happen *to* us, when in fact it is the end of the very self that anything could happen to. We do not fear the time before we were born. There is no reason, Epicurus argues, to fear the time after we die. Both are simply the absence of the self.

This is not a comfortable argument in the sense of being warm or reassuring. But it is a true one, and its practical effect – when it is genuinely internalized rather than merely intellectually accepted – is precisely the freedom from existential terror that the Church claims to offer but can only deliver on conditions: belief in doctrines for which there is no evidence, submission to an institution whose claim to authority rests on nothing more than its own assertions, and the acceptance of an afterlife whose terms are defined by that same institution and which includes, historically and doctrinally, the possibility of eternal punishment.

Epicurus's alternative is not resignation. It is the recognition that a life of finite duration, fully lived, is complete – that happiness does not require infinite time to be real, and that a life rich in friendship, understanding, and the genuine pleasures of existence can be described without irony as a blessed life. He demonstrated this himself on his deathbed, writing to a friend that the physical pain of his final illness was outweighed by the joy he felt in recalling their philosophical conversations.

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## On Virtue, Happiness, and the Catholic-Stoic Error

One of the sharpest disagreements between Epicurean philosophy and the Catholic tradition concerns the relationship between virtue and happiness. The Catholic tradition, heavily influenced by Stoicism through figures like Cicero and reinforced by the Church fathers and later by Aquinas, holds that virtue is an end in itself – that right action has intrinsic value independent of its effects on anyone's wellbeing, and that the highest human life is one of virtuous struggle and sacrifice rather than one of pleasure.

This is the view that Josh Hawley is promoting when he attacks Epicurus. It is the view implicit in books like Curtis Martin's *Made for More* and Scott Hahn's work on the sacrificial dimensions of the Mass. The Catholic vision of the good life is a life of suffering accepted, duty fulfilled, sacrifice made, virtue maintained in the face of temptation and difficulty – because this life is merely a testing ground for the eternal life to come.

Epicurus's response to this is not that virtue doesn't matter, but that it has the relationship to happiness exactly backwards. Virtue – honesty, justice, prudence, courage – is not an end in itself. It is a means to happiness, and a reliable one. The honest person sleeps well. The just person can maintain real friendships rather than merely transactional relationships. The prudent person avoids the pleasures that bring greater pain in their wake. The courageous person can face the necessary difficulties of life without the additional suffering that comes from cowardice. But if a virtue reliably produced unhappiness – if justice, say, consistently made people's lives worse – then on the Epicurean account that would be a reason to question whether we had correctly understood what justice requires.

This is not moral relativism. It is the recognition that morality is grounded in the real world – in the actual consequences of actions for actual people – rather than in supernatural commands, abstract ideals, or the requirements of an institution's authority. And it is, once you think it through, a considerably more demanding moral standard than the Catholic one, because it requires you to actually think about what will actually produce wellbeing, rather than simply consulting an authority and obeying.

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## On Community, Friendship, and the Garden

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Epicurean philosophy, to those who know it only from its caricature, is how central community and friendship are to it. Epicurus did not teach individuals to pursue pleasure in isolation. He founded a philosophical community – the Garden – and his letters and doctrines return again and again to the theme of friendship as among the greatest goods available to a human being.

The Garden was remarkable by the standards of ancient philosophy and indeed by any standards. Unlike the school of Plato it did not require study of Geometry or abstractions unrelated to real life. Those who agreed with Epicurean philosophy were admitted as valued members regardless of gender or social status. Epicurus wrote that "of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship," and he instructed his friends to study nature together with like-minded friends as the surest way to live among god-like blessings.[3]

This is precisely what many young people are looking for when they turn toward Catholic community. The hunger for genuine friendship, for a community that takes life seriously, for shared meals and shared convictions and shared practices – all of this is real and admirable. The question is whether the institutional shell of the Church, with its supernatural claims and its hierarchical authority, is the right container for that hunger. The Epicurean answer is that you can have everything good about intentional philosophical community without paying the price that the Church demands: the surrender of your reason, the acceptance of claims that cannot be verified, and the submission of your conscience to an authority that has demonstrated, repeatedly and catastrophically, that it cannot be trusted.

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## A Warning About Secondary Sources

Here it is important to say something that may surprise: not everything written about Epicurus is a reliable guide to Epicurus. The modern revival of interest in

Epicurean philosophy is genuinely exciting, but much of the popular writing about it – including some academic writing – has been produced by scholars who explicitly or implicitly accept elements of the Catholic or broadly Platonic worldview that Epicurus spent his life opposing.

When you read that Epicurus was "really" about tranquility rather than pleasure, that his philosophy is compatible with a religious sensibility, that the "absence of pain" he identified as the highest pleasure is equivalent to some kind of mystical emptiness, or that his ethics can be easily reconciled with a broadly theistic framework – be suspicious. These reinterpretations are almost always in the direction of making Epicurus less threatening to the Stoic-Catholic-Platonic consensus. They sand off the edges of a philosophy that was, in its original form, sharp and deliberate in its challenge to supernatural religion.

Go to the sources. Read the *Letter to Menoeceus*, the *Letter to Herodotus*, the *Principal Doctrines*, and the *Vatican Sayings*. Read Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, which is among the great poems in any language and which transmits Epicurean physics and ethics with extraordinary power. Read Diogenes Laertius's life of Epicurus. These texts are short, accessible, and available online for free. You do need to pay attention to how Epicurus uses terms in ways that are unfamiliar to us, but once you understand where Epicurus is coming from you do not need a mediator to understand him, just as you do not need a priest to understand the universe.

The core commitments of Epicurean philosophy are clear and non-negotiable. There are no supernatural gods who govern human affairs or punish and reward after death. The soul, like the body, is composed of atoms and disperses at death – there is no judgment, no heaven, no hell, no purgatory. This world – the natural world, the world of atoms and void and the lives we actually live – is the only world there is. There is no "true world" behind it waiting to be revealed by faith or accessed by the properly initiated. Nature, through the direct testimony of pleasure and pain, gives us our guide to living. Our task is to understand what this guide actually requires of us – with honesty, with intelligence, and with the help of friends.

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## A Direct Word to the Searching

If you are young and you feel that something has gone badly wrong – that the institutions you were handed are hollow, that the culture offers you nothing worth living for, that the relentless emphasis on individual consumption and digital stimulation has failed to make anyone happy, that you want something more serious and more real – you are right. Something has gone badly wrong. The culture is hollow. You deserve something better.

But consider carefully what is being offered when the Catholic Church presents itself as the answer. It is being offered by an institution that spent two millennia suppressing the philosophical alternative we have been discussing, that burned books and banned ideas and executed people who disagreed with its supernatural claims, that accumulated enormous institutional power by persuading people that a supernatural authority had delegated that power to it, and that is now – in the midst of ongoing scandals about the abuse of that power – presenting its ancient authority as the solution to the problems that its ancient authority helped create.

The troubled times of the late Roman Empire were eventually "solved" by the triumph of Christianity – and the result was the Dark Ages, the burning of the Library of Alexandria, the suppression of classical learning for a thousand years, the Inquisition, and the Wars of Religion that killed a quarter of the population of Central Europe. The Epicurean alternative – had it survived persecution rather than being systematically destroyed – would have offered something quite different: a world in which people pursued their genuine happiness with clear eyes, in honest community with their fellow human beings, without the terror of divine punishment, without the corrupting influence of priestly power, and without the demand that they surrender their reason to an institution claiming supernatural authority. Such a world would have seen properly how the goal of life is exactly as Thomas Jefferson stated it: *the pursuit of happiness.*

That alternative is still available. The texts survived. The tradition survived. Thomas Jefferson read them. Friedrich Nietzsche read them. Lucretius's poem survived fifteen centuries of Christian civilization to be rediscovered and printed

and read and to contribute, as Stephen Greenblatt has argued in *The Swerve*, directly to the intellectual movement that became the Renaissance and eventually the Enlightenment.

The Epicurean invitation is not to return to the past. It is to take what the past got right – the atomistic understanding of nature, the grounding of ethics in actual human wellbeing, the centrality of friendship, the freedom from supernatural terror, the recognition that this world is our only world and therefore deserves our full and joyful attention – and carry it forward into the present.

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## Conclusion: Choose This World

Epicurus died at seventy-two, after a period of decline in which he suffered considerable physical pain from kidney stones and other ailments, surrounded by his friends in the community he had built. His last letter, written on his deathbed, describes a day of physical suffering outweighed by the joy of friendship and the memory of a life well-lived which physical pain could not destroy. Even had Epicurus not lived as long as he did, such a life stands as a shining example of what can be accomplished through his philosophy.

This is what young people looking for something more solid and more serious should hear: not the voice of an institution claiming divine authority and promising supernatural rewards, but the voice of a human being who looked at the universe honestly, accepted what he found, worked out with care and compassion what that honest account required of him, and lived and died in the knowledge that a life of genuine friendship, genuine understanding, and genuine pleasure – pleasure in the full sense, pleasure of the body and mind together, pleasure in its Epicurean sense as all experience that is not painful – is enough. It is more than enough. It is, in fact, everything.

The world does not need more young people surrendering their reason to an ancient institution's supernatural claims. It needs more young people willing to do what Epicurus did: look at the world as it actually is, take nature as their guide, build genuine communities of friendship and honest inquiry, and pursue happi-

ness – real happiness, grounded in this real world – with open eyes and without fear.

That is the Epicurean invitation. It has always been there. It is there now. The only question is whether you are willing to accept it on its own terms, rather than on the terms that two thousand years of opposition have tried to impose on it.

Take it. Read the sources. Find your friends. Live well.

- This article has been prepared by Cassius Amicus with the generous assistance and participation of others, including the overlords of Artificial Intelligence. Cassius Amicus is solely responsible for its content.

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*It has been 2000 years since there have been any organized Epicurean communities, and there are not likely to be any real-world communities in the near future. That should be seen as a challenge, not as a reason for sadness, and the place to start is finding out for yourself what Epicurus really taught.*

*While remembering the warnings that it pays to start with a reliable commentary on Epicurus' true perspectives, such as the provided in Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy," the primary texts of Epicurean philosophy are available freely online. No living person can legitimately claim that they are the last word on Epicurean views, but there are many active websites pursuing the study of Epicurus. These include EpicureanFriends.com and sites such as EpicurusToday.com, where you will find the classical Epicurean worldview vigorously presented.*

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Two Epicurean Generals Whose Names Will Echo Longer Than Caesar - Torquatus And Velleius, Defenders of Epicurus

*How Two Roman Generals Preserved the True Epicurus – While the Scholars Lost Him*

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## I. The Problem No One Admits

Ask almost anyone to describe Epicurean philosophy and you will receive some version of the same answer: a gentle creed of modest pleasures, quiet gardens, good wine, close friends, and above all else, the avoidance of trouble. The Epicurean, in the popular imagination, is a recluse – a man who has retreated from the storms of public life to savor the small satisfactions of private existence. He prefers bread and water to a tyrant's banquet. He seeks *ataraxia*, that famously obscure Greek term usually rendered as tranquility, serenity, or the untroubled calm of still water. He has made his peace with the world by making his exit from it.

This portrait is almost entirely wrong.

It is not merely incomplete or overstated – it is a systematic inversion of how Epicurus lived and what Epicurus actually taught, constructed piecemeal over two millennia by philosophers, theologians, and popularizers who either misunderstood the texts, deliberately distorted them, or worked from the hostile caricatures of enemies rather than the authentic words of the tradition itself. The passive, retreating Epicurean – the ancient equivalent of a man who just wants

to be left alone to watch sunsets – is a philosophical ghost story, a specter conjured by those who needed Epicurus to be small so that their own systems could appear large by comparison.

How do we know this? We know it, in part, because Cicero preserved two extraordinary figures for us.

Their names are Lucius Manlius Torquatus and Gaius Velleius. They were Romans of the highest social rank, men of military experience and public distinction – precisely the kind of men, in other words, who should never have been Epicureans if the popular portrait of that philosophy were accurate. And yet they were Epicureans of the most serious kind: men who had read the texts, absorbed the arguments, trained under authentic teachers, and were prepared to argue for Epicurus at length, with precision and without apology, against the most formidable philosophical opponent of the age.

Cicero gave them a stage. And whether he intended it or not – and there is good reason to think he did not – what they said on that stage has survived as the clearest and most authoritative account of Classical Epicurean philosophy that the ancient world has left us.

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## II. Two Soldiers, One Philosophy

Before we enter the debate, we must understand who these men were, because their identities are inseparable from the argument they were making.

**Lucius Manlius Torquatus** was the scion of one of Rome's most storied military families. His ancestor Titus Manlius Torquatus had earned the cognomen *Torquatus* – "the neck-ringed one" – in the fourth century BC by killing a giant Gallic warrior in single combat and seizing his golden torque as a trophy of battle. That same Titus Manlius had later, as dictator, executed his own son for winning a battle without orders, because Roman military discipline demanded it. The name *Torquatus* thus carried two interwoven legends: extraordinary personal courage on the battlefield, and an iron willingness to place duty above every natural attachment, even the love of a father for his son.

Lucius Manlius Torquatus, who appears as Cicero's interlocutor in *De Finibus* (On Ends) around 50 BC, carried this inheritance with full awareness. He was no student philosopher debating in comfortable obscurity; he was a praetor, a man of affairs, and a figure of genuine public standing. His adoption of Epicurean philosophy was not a youthful flirtation or a private consolation – it was a considered intellectual commitment that he was willing to defend publicly, in dialogue with Rome's greatest orator and philosopher, citing chapter and verse from the Epicurean texts he had studied.

**Gaius Velleius** was a senator of similar standing. He appears in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods), likely written around 45 BC, identified explicitly as a prominent Epicurean. Like Torquatus, he was not a man on the margins of Roman society. He was at its center, which is precisely what makes his voice so significant: when a Roman senator of this rank stands up and argues, with evident passion and scholarly command, that Epicurus was right about the gods, we are not dealing with a philosophical curiosity. We are dealing with a man who had examined the options and made a serious choice.

These two figures matter beyond their individual biographies for a reason that is easy to miss if we approach them only as characters in a philosophical dialogue. Cicero did not invent their arguments. He was too scrupulous a philosopher, and too fair in his polemical methods, to put absurdities into the mouths of men who were his contemporaries and whom he respected as intellectual opponents. When Torquatus speaks in Book One of *On Ends*, he is speaking from authentic Epicurean textbooks – the same texts that circulated among the Epicurean communities of Rome and the Mediterranean world in the first century BC. When Velleius declaims in Book One of *On the Nature of the Gods*, he is voicing positions that had been worked out in detail by Epicurus himself, by Metrodorus, by Hermarchus, by Lucretius, and by the long chain of Epicurean teachers who had elaborated the school's physics and theology over three centuries.

In short: Torquatus and Velleius are not just interesting characters. They are windows. Through them, we see Epicurean philosophy as it was actually understood and argued for at the height of the ancient world, by men who had access to everything – every text, every teacher, every tradition – that the school possessed.

That version of the philosophy is startlingly different from the tame, passive, half-apologetic Epicureanism we are usually sold today.

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## III. Torquatus, Virtue, and the Courage to Name Pleasure

There is a certain drama in the opening of *De Finibus* that modern readers can easily miss. Cicero has feigned reluctance to discuss philosophy in Latin rather than Greek. Torquatus brushes this aside and tells him to stop stalling. The tone he strikes is not the gentle murmur of a man who prefers to stay out of arguments – it is the confident, even combative voice of someone who knows his ground and has no intention of retreating from it.

He begins with the ancestry he carries and the point he intends to make.

When Cicero raises an eyebrow at the idea that pleasure could be the highest good – how, Cicero implies, can the scion of such a family of warriors and disciplinarians hold such a doctrine? – Torquatus answers the challenge head-on. He does not retreat to a more comfortable formulation. He says, in essence: my ancestors acted exactly as Epicurean philosophy predicts and prescribes. The great Titus Manlius, who killed the Gaul and took his torque, who executed his own son for undisciplined valor – far from contradicting Epicurean philosophy, he exemplifies it.

This is a remarkable argument and it deserves to be taken seriously rather than dismissed as sophistry. Torquatus's point is that courage in battle, endurance of hardship, even the terrifying sternness of a father who puts military duty above paternal love – all of these flow naturally from a correct understanding of what pleasure actually is and how it is to be pursued. Epicurean philosophy does not say that every momentary tickle of sensation should be chased. It says that pleasure is the goal of life – and that a man of wisdom understands that some apparent pleasures lead to greater pains, while some apparent pains lead to greater pleasures. The soldier who faces battle is trading immediate discomfort and danger for the greater goods of honor, security, friendship, and the kind of deep self-approval that comes from having done what needed to be done.

The virtue of Torquatus's ancestor was not in spite of Epicurean philosophy. It was, Torquatus insists, precisely what Epicurean philosophy would have predicted and endorsed.

But Torquatus's most important contribution to the preservation of Epicurean philosophy is not this defense of military virtue. It is something subtler, and philosophically more fundamental: his precise account of what Epicurus meant when he said that pleasure is the highest good.

The Epicureans divided all feeling – all conscious experience – into exactly two categories: pleasure and pain. There was no third thing. When you are conscious of feeling anything at all, you are feeling either one or the other. Pleasure is good; pain is bad; everything that can be said about the moral life follows from this.

The difficulty arises – and it is here that centuries of confusion have accumulated – with the specific kind of pleasure Epicurus identified as the highest. Epicurus used the phrase *aponia* (absence of bodily pain) and *ataraxia* (absence of mental disturbance) to describe the pinnacle of the pleasurable life. And subsequent readers, up to and including many modern scholars, have made the catastrophic interpretive error of treating these as something *other* than pleasure – as if "absence of pain" described a neutral, blank, anesthetic state that was somehow higher than pleasure and categorically different from it.

Torquatus corrects this error with admirable directness. He makes plain that for Epicurus, there is no third state between pleasure and pain. When pain is absent – when you are free from bodily hurt and mental anxiety – that state is not neutral. It is not a featureless void. It is pleasure. *It is the very same thing as pleasure, described from a different angle.* To say "I am in no pain" and to say "I am experiencing pleasure" are, in the Epicurean framework, not two statements about different things. They are two names for one reality.

This is not a trivial point dressed up in philosophical language. It is, once understood, a complete reorientation of how we read the entire Epicurean system. The person who has achieved freedom from pain has not settled for some lesser, desiccated substitute for the pleasures of feast and festival and love. He has achieved the summit – the state in which pleasure is complete and stable, not subject to the fluctuations that attend any pleasure pursued in the wrong way or without philosophical understanding.

Torquatus puts it plainly: the removal of all pain is the limit of the greatest pleasure. And pleasure, when stable and complete, admits only of variation in kind, not of increase in degree. Once you have reached the summit – the full absence of pain – you can add variety, color, richness to your experience; but you cannot add more pleasure in the sense of surpassing that summit. The summit is the summit.

This is Epicurus as his school actually taught him: not a philosopher of anaesthetic withdrawal, but a philosopher who located the highest human good in a rich, active, fully conscious state of well-being that could withstand the shocks of fortune precisely because it was grounded not in the nervous pursuit of pleasures that depend on external luck, but in a trained, philosophically educated capacity to live well under any circumstances. Including, as Torquatus's own family tree attested, on the battlefield.

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## IV. "What Was God Doing Before He Made the World?" – Velleius Demolishes Intelligent Design

If Torquatus is the great defender of Epicurean ethics, Velleius is the great defender of Epicurean theology – and his weapon of choice is not a gentle pastoral argument but a sustained, relentless, almost prosecutorial assault on every alternative view of the divine that the ancient world had produced.

Velleius speaks first in *De Natura Deorum*, and the position he occupies in the dialogue is significant. He is the offensive speaker. Before anyone can ask him to defend the Epicurean view of the gods, he demolishes every competing view with a methodical ferocity that is difficult to read as anything but passion. This is not the tone of a man offering philosophy as private consolation. This is the tone of a man who has looked at the alternatives and found them not merely mistaken but intellectually dishonest – unworthy of serious minds.

His central target is what we would today call intelligent design: the argument that the order and structure of the world require an intelligent creator who designed it with purpose and intention. This argument was ancient long before Cicero's time. It appears in Plato, who in the *Timaeus* portrayed the cosmos as

the handicraft of a divine craftsman, the Demiurge, who looked to eternal Forms as his models and fashioned the world as their imperfect copy. It appears in Aristotle, in the guise of an unmoved mover whose pure thought imparted motion to the heavens. It reaches its fullest ancient development in Stoicism, which held that the cosmos is itself a divine, rational organism, pervaded by a creative fire or *logos* that gives everything its form and purpose.

Velleius does not merely disagree with these positions. He dismantles them as incoherent.

Against Plato's demiurge, he poses the question that devastates creation-myths of every kind: what was the god doing before he made the world? If the god is eternal, and the world was created at some point in time, then there was an eternity of time before the creation during which the god did nothing. Why did he wait? What stirred him into action after an infinite interval of inactivity? Was he bored? Did he have a plan that suddenly crystallized after endless eons without one? No satisfying answer is available. The god either existed in an eternal state of purposeless stasis – which is not a picture of perfection – or his decision to create was prompted by some external cause, which means he is not the first and ultimate explanation of things after all.

Against Aristotle's unmoved mover, Velleius raises similarly acute difficulties. A god who is pure intellect contemplating only himself, divorced from any relationship with the world he supposedly moves, is no god in any sense that ordinary human understanding can connect with the divine. He is an abstraction, a philosophical convenience dressed in theological language.

Against the Stoics, Velleius is if anything more scathing. The Stoic god is the world itself – a divine reason that pervades matter and gives it form, that is simultaneously the craftsman and the material, the fire that burns through everything. But this means the Stoic god is not immune to change, dissolution, and suffering. A god who is identical with the material world must share the fates of that world. He burns, he freezes, he rots, he is rebuilt. This is not blessedness. This is simply nature under a pious pseudonym.

What, then, does Epicurus offer in place of these constructions?

Velleius explains that the Epicurean case for divinity does not begin with an argument. It begins with a fact of human consciousness. Every human mind, in every culture, forms a preconception – a *prolepsis* – of the divine. This is not the result of education, tradition, or philosophical argument. It arises naturally, before argument is possible, from the very structure of how minds work. The content of this preconception is consistent across all peoples and all ages: divine beings are blessed, immortal, and free from every kind of trouble or disturbance.[1]

Now here is the key move. Epicurus does not derive the gods' nature from the world. He derives it from that universal preconception – and then he asks what kind of beings would actually fit that preconception. What would blessed, immortal, undisturbed existence actually require?

It would require, first and foremost, that such beings have absolutely nothing to do with the management of the world. Management is trouble. Creation is labor. Maintenance is exhausting. Any being who was genuinely in a state of perfect blessedness – in the fullest Epicurean sense, meaning free from all pain, all anxiety, all frustration – would not be running a universe. The universe, with all its conflict and suffering and chaos, is precisely the kind of thing that would disturb a blessed being's serenity if that being were entangled with it.

The Epicurean gods, therefore, live in what Lucretius describes as the *intermundia* – the vast tranquil spaces between the infinite worlds that constitute the cosmos. They are real beings. They are what the human mind has always, in its deepest intuitions, recognized as truly divine. They are not, however, creators, managers, judges, or punishers of human beings. They take no interest in human affairs because an interest in human affairs would be a kind of imperfection – a sign that their blessedness was incomplete, that they had needs or purposes that required the machinery of the world to satisfy.

This view of the gods, Velleius argues, is not atheism. It is not the secret atheism that ancient critics accused Epicurus of harboring. It is, rather, the only theologically consistent account of divinity available – the only account that does not require us to believe in a god who is secretly troubled, limited, or defective. The Platonist god who frets over his creation, the Stoic god who *is* the creation and therefore suffers with it, the creator-god who existed in purposeless idleness for an eternity before inexplicably deciding to make a world – all of these are, in Vel-

leius's telling, less genuinely divine than the Epicurean gods who exist in perfect, undisturbed, eternal blessedness.

Behind this argument lies a broader point about the intellectual method that produces good philosophy versus bad philosophy. Velleius is insisting that our picture of the divine must begin with reality – with what is actually observable and what can actually be inferred from observation – rather than with comfortable stories that violate basic logic. The question "what was god doing before creation?" is not a cheap rhetorical trick. It is a demand for logical accountability of the kind that Epicurus introduced into philosophical theology and that his successors, Torquatus and Velleius among them, carried forward with what we can only call military discipline.

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## V. The Roman Senate's Epicurean Wing

It would be a mistake to treat Torquatus and Velleius as isolated curiosities – two philosophers who happened to have military family backgrounds but who otherwise existed apart from the world of Roman action. The evidence suggests, rather, that serious Epicureanism among Rome's governing class was far more widespread than the history books typically acknowledge.

The philosophical schools competed intensely for the allegiances of Rome's educated elite during the late Republic, and Epicureanism held its own in that competition. The Stoics were formidable rivals and eventually won the ideological contest – Stoicism became the default philosophy of the Roman imperial ruling class, the creed of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca – but in the crucial decades of the late Republic, the Epicureans were a genuine force. Philodemus of Gadara, the great Epicurean philosopher and poet, operated at Herculaneum under the patronage of Lucius Calpurnius Piso, Julius Caesar's father-in-law. The villa at Herculaneum that bore his library – the Villa of the Papyri, whose charred scrolls we are still recovering and reading today – was a salon of Epicurean intellectual life frequented by major figures of the age.

Torquatus and Velleius were not, therefore, aberrations. They were part of a serious and sophisticated movement – one that happened to produce some of the

Republic's most capable soldiers and statesmen alongside its philosophers and poets.

What Cicero did, by choosing them as his interlocutors in *De Finibus* and *De Natura Deorum*, was something more complex than simple philosophical dialogue. He was acknowledging – however reluctantly, and with whatever ulterior argumentative motives – that Epicureanism was a position serious enough to be represented by serious men. He was also, perhaps without fully realizing it, preserving for posterity the most sustained and coherent presentation of Classical Epicurean philosophy that has survived from the ancient world.

Julius Caesar's name, needless to say, echoes through the ages. But Caesar left behind no philosophical exposition of Epicurean ethics. He left no account of what Epicurus really meant when he said that pleasure is the highest good, or how the Epicurean gods relate to the question of intelligent design. He left wars and monuments and biographies and political transformations. Torquatus and Velleius – through Cicero's pen – left something that has proven, across two thousand years, at least as durable: a clear-eyed, philosophically rigorous, intellectually courageous defense of the truth about how to live.

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## VI. A Third General: Cassius Longinus and the Letter That Changed Everything

There is a third Roman military figure who, while not the main subject of this article, casts a long shadow over everything that Torquatus and Velleius represent. His name was Gaius Cassius Longinus – the same Cassius whose name is inseparably linked with the Ides of March, the man who organized the conspiracy that ended Julius Caesar's life, the general who later died at Philippi.

Cassius was a proudly self-proclaimed Epicurean.

This is documented beyond any reasonable doubt in his own surviving letters to Cicero, written in the last years of the Republic. These letters are remarkable documents – frank, intellectually confident, sometimes playful, always revealing. They show us a man who had not merely adopted Epicurean philosophy as a social fashion or a private consolation, but who had genuinely absorbed it,

thought it through, and could argue for it with the same clarity he brought to military strategy.

The exchange between Cicero and Cassius on the subject of Epicureanism is one of the most fascinating in the entire corpus of Latin letters. Cicero was a persistent, sometimes affectionate, sometimes mocking skeptic of Cassius's philosophical commitments. In one letter (Fam. 15.16), he teases Cassius about "spectres" – the Epicurean doctrine that mental images are generated by physical films emitted from objects – and suggests, with some theatrical indignation, that the great warrior has been seduced away from Virtue into the arms of Pleasure.[2]

Cassius's reply (Fam. 15.19) is everything a defender of Epicurus could wish for.[3] He cuts through the mockery with philosophical precision. He points out that Epicurus himself had always insisted that it is impossible to live a life of genuine pleasure without living a life of virtue and justice. The Epicurean is not abandoning virtue when he names pleasure as the goal – he is grounding virtue correctly, in its actual relationship to human well-being, rather than floating it in the thin air of Platonic abstraction. Virtue matters because it works. It produces the conditions under which pleasure is possible and sustainable. A man who lives unjustly is a man living in constant anxiety about discovery and punishment – which is precisely not the Epicurean life. The virtuous life and the pleasurable life are not two lives pointing in different directions. They converge.

But it is Cicero's response to Cassius that has the greatest philosophical resonance. In the same letter where he teases Cassius about Epicureanism, Cicero catches himself mid-argument and says something extraordinary. Having just delivered what reads like a standard-issue philosophical dismissal of the pleasure-philosophy, he suddenly pauses and addresses Cassius directly: *"And yet to whom am I talking? To you, the most gallant gentleman in the world, who, ever since you set foot in the forum, have done nothing but what bears every mark of the most impressive distinction."*[4] And then – the concession that reverberates: *"Why, in that very school you have selected I apprehend there is more vitality than I should have supposed, if only because it has your approval."*[5]

This is Cicero – the greatest philosophical and rhetorical mind of Rome, the man who had constructed the most sophisticated critique of Epicureanism in the Latin language – admitting that Epicureanism has proven itself, in the per-

son of Cassius Longinus, to have more power and more reality than he had given it credit for. The philosophy that he had spent years arguing was merely the creed of the comfortable, the doctrine of pleasure-seekers who had confused the good with the agreeable, had produced this: a man of absolute integrity, supreme courage, and decisive political action. A man who organized the most dramatic act of republican resistance in Roman history. A man whose conduct was, by any measure, as distinguished as the conduct of Torquatus's legendary ancestors.

Why does this matter for our understanding of Torquatus and Velleius? Because it confirms, from an unexpected and hostile witness, the thesis that they had been arguing all along. It was not a coincidence that Epicureanism produced such men. It was not a contradiction. Cicero, in his letter to Cassius, was forced by the evidence of a single life to concede what Torquatus had argued philosophically a few years earlier: that Epicurean philosophy, correctly understood, is entirely consistent with – and may even be the most solid foundation for – exactly the kind of courage, virtue, and active engagement with the world that Rome's most demanding traditions required.

The weak, passive, anesthetic Epicurean of the popular imagination would never have been confused with Cassius Longinus. The strong, disciplined, philosophically grounded Epicurean that Torquatus and Velleius described – that man could lead armies, face tyrants, and die with his philosophical convictions intact.

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## VII. What the Soldiers Knew That the Scholars Forgot

We are left with a question that is both historical and urgently contemporary: how did the version of Epicureanism that Torquatus defended – confident, active, philosophically rigorous, entirely at home with courage and public virtue – get replaced by the tame, passive, comfort-seeking version that now dominates the popular understanding?

The answer is long and involves many hands. Christianity's triumph required a neutered Epicurus – a Epicurus who could be safely caricatured as a wallowing sensualist, then discarded as a warning against the dangers of placing pleasure above God's commands. Later philosophical traditions had their own reasons for

keeping Epicurus small: the Stoics needed their greatest rival to appear merely self-indulgent; the Platonists needed him to appear philosophically shallow; the moralists needed him to appear dangerous to social order. Each tradition contributed its brushstroke to a portrait that served everyone's needs except the truth.

What Torquatus knew – and what Velleius knew – and what Cassius Longinus demonstrated in his own extraordinary life – is that Epicurean philosophy was never a philosophy of retreat. It was a philosophy of orientation. It told you what was real, what mattered, and what you were actually trying to achieve when you chose one course of action over another. That clarity – that unsparing, sensation-grounded, logically disciplined clarity – was not the enemy of courage and public virtue. It was their finest intellectual support.

The Roman soldier who stood in the battle-line knowing what he valued, why he valued it, and what the loss of it would actually mean – who understood that the freedom from fear was not a passive state but an achievement earned through understanding – was not less prepared for battle than the Stoic soldier who had convinced himself that external events were matters of indifference. He may well have been more prepared. He had a reason that was grounded in his actual nature as a sensing, feeling, living being, rather than in an abstract philosophical principle whose connection to lived experience required constant rhetorical maintenance.

Torquatus's ancestor fought the Gallic giant for the same reason that any brave man has ever done a difficult thing: because the outcome mattered, because honor mattered, because the kind of man he was – the kind of life he was living – demanded it. Epicurean philosophy gives that kind of motivation its most honest account. It does not dress it up in the language of pure rational duty, or claim that the brave man feels nothing while he acts. It says: this man valued something. He acted to protect and express what he valued. And his action was, in the deepest Epicurean sense, pleasurable – not because it was comfortable, but because it was fully consistent with who he was and what he chose to be.

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## VIII. An Unfinished Echo

History has a sense of irony that philosophy sometimes lacks. Julius Caesar – the man who was killed partly by Cassius Longinus, the Epicurean general – is remembered by every schoolchild in the world. His name became a title: Kaiser, Czar. His Gallic Wars are still read in Latin classrooms. His assassination is still staged.

But who, outside of scholars and dedicated students of ancient philosophy, knows what Lucius Manlius Torquatus argued about the nature of pleasure on a particular afternoon in *De Finibus* Book One? Who has heard of Gaius Velleius, the Roman senator who took apart the intelligent design argument with such surgical precision in *De Natura Deorum* that Cicero, who disagreed with everything he said, could not simply dismiss him? Who reads the letter in which Cicero admitted, against all his polemical instincts, that Epicurean philosophy had more life in it than he had supposed, because it had produced Cassius?

The answer, for now, is: not many. But this is not a fact about the importance of what those men said. It is a fact about the success of the forces that suppressed it. The texts survived – improbably, through the copying work of monks who probably did not realize what they were preserving, through the explosive rediscovery of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* in 1417, through the slow, patient scholarship of centuries. The arguments are still there. Torquatus's clarification of what Epicurus meant by absence of pain is still the clearest statement of that doctrine in the ancient record. Velleius's attack on intelligent design still reads, in places, as if it were written last week. Cassius's letter defending Epicurean virtue still carries the urgency of a man who has thought the matter through and will not be talked out of it by anyone, even Cicero.

What the ancient world knew – and what these three Roman soldiers, in their different ways, embodied and articulated – was a version of Epicurus that our age has largely lost. Not the Epicurus of garden parties and mild pleasures and philosophical semi-retirement, but the Epicurus who stands at the beginning of a straight line running through Torquatus and Velleius and Cassius Longinus: the philosopher of facing reality without flinching, of grounding the good life

not in fantasies of divine reward or Platonic abstraction or Stoic emotional suppression, but in what every living being – from the moment of its first breath – already knows.

Their names will echo as long as that argument needs to be made.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Epicurus And The Jews - Conflict And Opposition

In the tractate Sanhedrin of the Talmudic Mishnah — one of the most authoritative documents of Rabbinical Judaism — there is a passage that defines the boundaries of Jewish religious identity with unusual precision. It begins by asserting that all Israel has a share in the world to come, then identifies the exceptions: those who deny the resurrection of the dead, those who deny that the Torah comes from heaven, and — named specifically — *Apikorsim*.

The word *Apikoros* is a Hebrew transliteration of "Epicurean." Modern Jews use it as a generic term for a skeptic or unbeliever. But the authors of the Talmud were not using it generically. They were singling out the followers of a specific philosopher by name, and placing the corruption of Jewish faith by Epicurean ideas alongside denial of resurrection and denial of divine revelation as the three fundamental failures that exclude a person from the world to come.

This is not a casual insult. It is a precise theological judgment — and an honest one. Of all the philosophical traditions of the ancient Mediterranean world, Epicurean philosophy was the one most directly and completely contrary to the foundational claims of Jewish religion. The Talmud's authors understood this. The question is whether we do.

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## The Philosophical Problem: Chosen People and the Gods Who Don't Choose

The incompatibility between Epicurean philosophy and Jewish religious thought is not peripheral. It is structural, operating at the level of first principles.

Epicurus taught that gods are perfectly blessed beings who inhabit the intermundia — the spaces between worlds — in a state of complete self-sufficiency. They have no needs, no frustrations, no agenda regarding human affairs. They do not create worlds. They do not issue commands. They do not reward the obedient or punish the disobedient. They do not choose peoples, make covenants, or intervene in history. Principal Doctrine 1 states the position without qualification: "The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour. For all such things exist only in the weak."[1]

Anger and favor. These two words capture everything. The god who punishes the disobedient with anger and rewards the faithful with favor — the god of the Hebrew Bible in its most characteristic expression — is precisely the kind of god that Epicurus's analysis rules out. A god that can be angered is a god that can be frustrated. A god that can bestow favor is a god that has preferences among creatures. These are not attributes of the blessed and immortal. They are attributes of the weak — of beings whose wellbeing depends on things outside themselves.

And then there is the most specific claim of Jewish theology: that the gods have a chosen people. That among all the nations of the earth, this particular group stands in a special relationship with the divine — has received divine revelation, has entered a covenant with the creator of the universe, has been given commandments whose observance earns divine favor and whose violation earns divine punishment.

For Epicurus, this claim is not merely false. It is the paradigm case of the groundless fear and longing that makes human beings miserable. The belief that the gods are watching, judging, choosing, rewarding, and punishing — that your wellbeing depends on correctly identifying which god to propitiate and what that god requires of you — is exactly the belief that Epicurean philosophy was built, from its foundations, to dissolve. The fear of divine retribution that poisons daily life, the guilt that comes from inevitable failure to meet divine standards, the anxiety about whether you have done enough to secure divine favor — these are, in the Epicurean analysis, the products of false beliefs about the nature

of the divine. They generate enormous amounts of genuine pain without any corresponding genuine good.

The claim of a chosen people is the most extreme possible version of this error: not merely the belief that the gods watch and judge all human beings, but the belief that the gods have a special relationship with *us specifically* — have chosen our people, made a covenant with our ancestors, given us particular obligations and particular promises. If Epicurean philosophy is correct that the divine does not intervene in human affairs and does not favor some over others, then the chosen-people claim is false from its first word. And if it is false, then the entire structure of obligation, covenant, guilt, and divine favor that it supports collapses with it.

This is why the Talmud specifically named Epicureans. Not Platonists, not Stoics, not Skeptics — though all of these also had positions incompatible with Jewish theology. Epicureans. Because Epicurean philosophy attacked those specific beliefs more directly than any other.

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## Antiochus, the Gymnasium, and the Maccabean Crisis

The historical roots of Jewish hostility to Epicurus run deeper than philosophical analysis. They are embedded in one of the most traumatic episodes in ancient Jewish history: the Maccabean crisis of the second century BC.

In 175 BC, the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to power over a kingdom that stretched from Syria through Judea toward Egypt. Antiochus was sympathetic to Epicureanism — a disposition that shaped his vision of a culturally unified Hellenistic empire. When Antiochus moved to consolidate Judea as part of his Egyptian campaign, he intervened directly in the internal politics of the Jewish priesthood. He removed the Zadokite high priest — who happened to be a pro-Ptolemaic partisan — and established a Greek-style Gymnasium in Jerusalem.

The Gymnasium was the institutional center of Hellenistic culture: the place where Greek language, Greek philosophy, Greek athletics, and Greek social practices were transmitted and practiced. In Jerusalem, in the shadow of the Temple,

it represented the direct imposition of the philosophical and cultural framework that Antiochus favored — a framework in which Epicurean ideas were prominent — onto the most sacred geography of Jewish religious life.

The Zadokite priesthood had itself been deeply influenced by Greek culture before Antiochus's intervention. The Zadokites had adopted doctrines that discounted the conservative oral tradition and denied some of the more superstitious elements of popular belief — notably including the belief in bodily resurrection. These positions had obvious affinities with Epicurean philosophy. But what had been a slow process of cultural assimilation became, under Antiochus, an intentional transformation — and this initiative triggered a violent reaction.

The Hasmonean revolt, led by Judas Maccabeus, was not merely a military uprising against foreign rule. It was a religious and cultural war that drew its identity precisely from opposition to everything Antiochus's Gymnasium represented. In the nationalist memory that the Maccabean revolt created — a memory celebrated annually even today in Hanukkah — Epicurean philosophy was permanently associated with foreign domination, temple desecration, and the threat to Jewish identity. The Hellenizers who had made accommodation with Antiochus were remembered as traitors. The philosophy associated with their would-be patron was remembered as the enemy.

After the Hasmoneans consolidated their power, the factional conflict between the Pharisees — the party of the "separatists," fiercely committed to the oral tradition and the distinctive practices of Jewish identity — and the Sadducees — the heirs of the Zadokite priesthood, more amenable to Hellenistic cultural influence — became the defining political contest of Jewish life. The Pharisees won. The Talmud is the product of the Pharisaic tradition. And the Talmudic denunciation of *Apikorsim* carries within it the memory of the Maccabean crisis, the Gymnasium in Jerusalem, and the philosophical tradition that Antiochus had favored.

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## Diogenes of Oinoanda on the Jews: Fragment 20

Diogenes of Oinoanda, the Epicurean philosopher who had the complete Epicurean philosophy inscribed on a public wall in his city so that everyone could read it for free, addressed the question of religious belief and moral conduct with characteristic directness in Fragment 20 of that inscription. The passage should be read carefully, because it states the Epicurean position on the relationship between religion and morality with a plainness that modern diplomatic convention would rarely permit:

> *"A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples."*[2]

This is a harsh judgment, and it should be understood in its philosophical context before it is assessed. Diogenes is not making an anthropological or ethnic claim. He is making an epistemological and moral argument: if religious devotion — intense, sustained, institutionalized religious devotion of the kind that the Jews and Egyptians practiced — produced correspondingly virtuous behavior, that would be evidence that the gods take an interest in human conduct and reward those who worship them. But if the most devout peoples are not correspondingly the most virtuous — if superstition and moral excellence do not correlate — then the claim that the gods reward the faithful is false.

The broader argument in Fragment 20 is that genuine moral conduct comes not from fear of the gods or hope for divine reward, but from philosophical understanding — specifically from correct understanding of pleasure and pain, and of death. Wrong-doers who do not fear the law's penalties will not be deterred by fear of gods they do not believe are watching. The genuinely wise are not righteous because of the gods but because of correct reasoning about what constitutes genuine good and genuine harm. Ordinary people are righteous, insofar as they are righteous, because of the laws and penalties — not because of divine surveillance.

Diogenes's reference to the Jews is evidence that Epicurean thinkers were engaging directly with the specific claims of Jewish theology — not as an abstraction,

but as the concrete practice of a real and visible community whose theology made precisely the kind of claims about divine favor and divine punishment that Epicurean philosophy denied.

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## Nietzsche: The Slave Revolt and Paul's Inheritance

Nietzsche's analysis of the relationship between Judaism and the emergence of Christian values is one of the most controversial arguments in the history of ideas — and it is directly relevant to understanding the Epicurean position, because what Nietzsche identifies as the problem with Christian morality is precisely the problem that Epicurus had already diagnosed two centuries before Paul.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche argues that Christian moral values represent a systematic inversion of the values of Greek and Roman antiquity — an inversion that he calls "the slave revolt in morality." The distinctive Christian elevation of humility, suffering, weakness, and renunciation above strength, pride, pleasure, and worldly achievement was not, for Nietzsche, an advance in moral understanding. It was a form of revenge — the only revenge available to people who lacked the power to take more direct forms.

Nietzsche traces this inversion specifically to the Jewish experience of subjection to foreign powers, from the Babylonian captivity through the Hellenistic period through Roman rule. A people consistently dominated by more powerful neighbors, and unable to resist that domination militarily or politically, developed — in Nietzsche's analysis — a characteristic psychological response: the revaluation of the terms of the contest. If the powerful are winning by the existing rules, change the rules. If worldly power and pleasure are what the powerful have and you lack, declare that worldly power and pleasure are not the genuine goods. Declare that suffering is ennobling, that humility is virtue, that the meek will inherit the earth, and that those who now triumph in the world will face divine punishment in the next.

This is, for Nietzsche, the deepest meaning of Paul's career: the transformation of a Jewish resentment of Roman power into a universal moral system that de-

clared Roman values — strength, pleasure, worldly achievement — to be sinful, and declared the values of the defeated — suffering, humility, renunciation — to be sacred. Paul was "the greatest of all apostles of revenge," in Nietzsche's formulation.[3] He took the specifically Jewish experience of subjection and gave it universal theological expression.

The connection to Epicurus is immediate. The values that Paul's system declared sinful are precisely the values that Epicurus had most clearly defended: pleasure as the natural goal of life, honest engagement with this world as the only world, freedom from guilt and fear as the prerequisite for genuine happiness, the refusal to believe that the gods punish and reward. The Roman culture that Paul was fighting — and that had, in Nietzsche's account, been making its peace with Epicurean philosophy — was being attacked precisely at those points where it was most Epicurean.

Nietzsche is not being overbroad and labeling an entire ethnic group as responsible for this resentment. His target throughout is not the Jewish people as a whole but the specific moral framework — the elevation of suffering, the guilt, the denunciation of worldly pleasure — that he traces to the historical experience of subjection. His target is the same framework wherever he finds it and among whatever people, including in narrow-minded German nationalism and in universal-minded Christianity's post-Pauline forms. What he is identifying is a historical pattern: that the specific theological and moral tradition that Judaism developed, and that Paul transmuted into Christianity, was built in systematic opposition to the values that Epicurus had most clearly and most powerfully articulated.

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## Rome, the Jewish Wars, and an Epicurean Empress

The most dramatic episodes of ancient Roman-Jewish conflict occurred under the emperors whose imperial household included the most notable Epicurean of the Roman imperial period.

Pompeia Plotina, wife of the Emperor Trajan and effectively the adoptive mother of Hadrian, was a devoted follower of Epicurean philosophy. This is not infer-

ence or conjecture. It is documented in the inscriptions preserved from Athens, where the Epicurean school's succession documents record her personal intervention on the school's behalf. In AD 121, while Hadrian was inspecting the provinces, Plotina wrote to him arguing for a change in the law that governed the Epicurean school's leadership succession. Under existing Roman law, the head of the school was required to appoint a successor from among Roman citizens, and the will had to be written in Latin — restrictions that severely limited the pool of candidates and prevented the school's most qualified members from assuming leadership.

Plotina's letter to Hadrian begins with a statement that is one of the most direct personal testimonies of Epicurean commitment from the ancient world: *"How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord."*[4] Hadrian granted her request, allowing the school's leader to write a will in Greek and to choose a successor from among non-citizens as well as citizens. Plotina then wrote to the school announcing the decision: *"We have what we were eager to get."* Upon her death, Hadrian deified her and built temples in her honor. The philosopher-empress who had served as the institutional patron of the Epicurean school in Athens was commemorated as a goddess.

The irony of the historical moment is striking. Trajan, whose empress was an Epicurean, had prosecuted wars to suppress two major Jewish revolts. The Kitos War of 115-117 AD — so named from the general Lusius Quietus whom Trajan deployed against the Jewish rebels — was a massive uprising of Jewish communities throughout the eastern Mediterranean, including in Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrene. Trajan died in 117, and the succession question was managed — Hadrian's historians would later allege, perhaps with political motive — partly through Plotina's influence. Hadrian then faced and suppressed the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-135 AD, the third and final great Jewish uprising against Rome, after which Judea was renamed Syria Palaestina and Jews were banned from Jerusalem.

The historical coincidence — an Epicurean empress in the household of the emperors who fought the last great Jewish revolts points to a broader pattern: that the Roman imperial culture whose confrontation with Jewish nationalism was most intense was also the culture that was making its most serious peace with the

philosophical tradition that Judaism had identified as its primary intellectual enemy.

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## Maimonides and the Long Memory

The Talmudic denunciation of *Apikorsim* was not merely a historical curiosity. It became, through the work of Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century, one of the foundational statements of Jewish theological self-definition for the medieval and modern periods.

Maimonides, the most famous Jewish philosopher of the medieval world, continued and systematized the rabbinic opposition to Epicurean ideas while working to reconcile Jewish theology with Aristotelian philosophy in works like his *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide for the Perplexed*. Throughout his work, the category of *Apikoros* functions as the marker of the philosophical boundary beyond which Jewish religious identity dissolves. The one who denies divine providence, who denies divine judgment, who denies that the universe was created and is governed by a purposive intelligence — that person has placed themselves outside the community of Israel in the most fundamental sense.

The persistence of this category — from the Talmudic Mishnah through Maimonides to modern Hebrew usage — is testimony to the enduring precision of the original identification. The *Apikoros* is not just any skeptic. The *Apikoros* is specifically the person who has accepted the Epicurean account of the universe: that it is natural rather than supernatural, that the divine is not involved in human affairs, that death is the end of sensation rather than a transition to judgment, and that the life aimed at pleasure in this world is the best life available.

These are the specific beliefs that the Talmud identified as incompatible with Jewish religious identity. They remain so. And they remain, for the same reasons that the Talmudic authors identified, the most fundamental challenge that any thoroughgoing naturalist philosophy poses to any supernaturalist religious framework.

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## What the Conflict Reveals

The history of Epicurean-Jewish conflict is, in one sense, simply the history of two incompatible worldviews encountering each other in the specific conditions of the ancient Mediterranean world. The Seleucid efforts at hellenization, the Maccabean revolt, the Talmudic denunciation, the philosophical polemics of Diogenes of Oinoanda, and the Roman-Jewish wars conducted under an emperor whose household included an Epicurean empress — these are specific historical events shaped by specific historical circumstances.

But the conflict also reveals something about the nature of both worldviews that is not merely historical. The Jewish theological tradition made, and makes, claims that are structurally incompatible with Epicurean philosophy: that the universe was created by a purposive intelligence, that this intelligence has a special relationship with a specific people, that it rewards and punishes human conduct, and that death is not the end but a transition to judgment. These claims cannot be true if Epicurean physics and theology are correct.

Nietzsche saw this clearly, and traced the specifically Jewish origin of the moral framework that Paul then universalized into Christianity: the elevation of suffering, the guilt, the denunciation of worldly pleasure, the promise of divine reward for the oppressed and divine punishment for the powerful. What Epicurus had built as the most comprehensive and most accessible alternative to supernatural morality — the philosophy of pleasure, of honest engagement with the natural world, of freedom from divine fear — was the specific philosophy that this tradition recognized as its primary enemy and named explicitly in its most authoritative documents.

The *Apikoros* is the person who has accepted what nature honestly examined actually shows: that the gods do not favor anyone, that this world is the only world, and that the life aimed at genuine pleasure is the best life available. The Talmud was right to identify that person as the fundamental theological challenge. And Epicurus was right to identify the fear of divine favor and divine punishment — in its Jewish form as in its Greek and Roman and later Christian

forms — as among the groundless fears and dangerous longings from which philosophical honesty liberates the human mind.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Commentary On The Doctrines of Epicurus

## Preface

This document brings together two of the most important primary sources in Classical Epicurean philosophy – the *Principal Doctrines* and the *Vatican Sayings* – along with a systematic commentary on how each has been misread by later interpreters.

The *Principal Doctrines* (*Kyriai Doxai*) are a collection of forty authoritative propositions transmitted by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (Book X). They represent the closest thing to a formal doctrinal summary that survives from Epicurus himself, covering the nature of the gods, death, pleasure, pain, justice, and the proper conduct of life. The *Vatican Sayings* are a collection of approximately eighty aphorisms from Epicurus and his associates, rediscovered in a Vatican manuscript in 1888. Less formally structured than the Principal Doctrines, they preserve some of Epicurus' most direct and personal expressions on friendship, desire, self-sufficiency, old age, and the pursuit of happiness. Both collections were translated into English by Cyril Bailey in *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford, 1926), and the Bailey translations are the primary basis for the translations that follows.

For each doctrine and saying, this document identifies the dominant modern misreading, names the adulterating tradition responsible for it – whether Stoic, Platonic, religious, Humanist, or Academic Skeptical – and then restates the correct Epicurean interpretation grounded in what Epicurus and his school actually wrote and taught. The purpose is not merely critical: it is constructive. Two thousand years of philosophical cross-contamination have left most popular and

academic presentations of Epicureanism shaped more by his rivals than by Epicurus himself. Stoics have turned his counsel of pleasure into a counsel of endurance; Platonists have turned his naturalism into a covert spiritualism; religious interpreters have treated his rejection of divine providence as a moral deficiency to be excused or minimized; Humanists have drafted him into causes he would not have recognized. The result is that the genuine Epicurean position – bold, empiricist yet rational, life-affirming, and rigorously anti-supernatural – is rarely encountered in its undiluted form.

The commentary is arranged in two parts. Part One covers the forty Principal Doctrines in order. Part Two covers the Vatican Sayings, with cross-references to the Principal Doctrines where the texts overlap. Readers who are new to Epicurean philosophy may wish to read the doctrines and sayings straight through first before returning to the commentary; those already familiar with the texts may find it more useful to read commentary and text together, doctrine by doctrine.

**All commentary in this document has been compiled and edited by Cassius Amicus. It is subject to regular revision and improvement, and you should always check this page for the latest version. Comments and suggestions may be submitted by email but are best received as part of the discussion thread for this document at EpicureanFriends.com.**

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## Part One: The Principal Doctrines

The forty *Principal Doctrines* of Epicurus are among the most important texts in the history of philosophy – and among the most consistently misread. Over two thousand years, a steady stream of interpreters working from Stoic, Platonic, religious, skeptical, and Humanist assumptions have read foreign frameworks into these doctrines, turning Epicurus into a pale version of his rivals or, worse, into an ascetic, a recluse, or a moral relativist. The result is that most people who encounter Epicurean philosophy today are meeting a distorted reconstruction rather than the genuine article.

This page examines each of the forty doctrines in the Bailey translation, identifies the primary adulterating tradition responsible for the dominant misreading,

states the common misinterpretation plainly, and then gives the correct Epicurean interpretation from the perspective of what Epicurus actually wrote and what his philosophy was actually designed to accomplish.

The Bailey translations used here are from Cyril Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford, 1926).



## PD 1

**Bailey:** *"The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour. For all such things exist only in the weak."*[1]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus was simply an atheist who dismissed the gods as irrelevant, or this doctrine is an outdated theological curiosity with no practical bearing on modern life.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This doctrine does urgent practical work: it removes the greatest single source of human fear and anxiety – the belief that powerful divine beings are watching, judging, and punishing or rewarding us. Epicurus did not dismiss the gods; he described their true nature in order to free us from the fear of divine retribution that poisons happiness at its root. The target is not theology in the abstract but the specific mind virus of supernatural fear that every religion of reward and punishment exploits.



## PD 2

**Bailey:** *"Death is nothing to us: for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us."*[2]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Stoicism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** This is a counsel of brave resignation – Stoic-flavored acceptance that death is inevitable and must be faced with courage. Others assimilate it to Buddhist non-attachment or "mindful acceptance."

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is not about courage or acceptance at all. It is a logical argument that dissolves the fear of death by exposing its hidden false premise – that death will be *experienced* as something bad. Once you see that the dissolved person has no sensation, there is no subject left to suffer. The fear was always irrational, not merely something to be endured bravely. The Stoic reading substitutes endurance for understanding; the religious reading substitutes afterlife hope for the same understanding. Epicurus offers something more valuable than either: the fear simply ceases to have any rational foundation, and true courage to face adversity emerges when we realize that there can be nothing terrible in life for those who understand that there is nothing terrible in death.



## PD 3

**Bailey:** *"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."*[3]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is teaching asceticism – the most one can hope for is the mere absence of pain, a thin and modest reward. The doctrine sets a low ceiling on what pleasure can be.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This doctrine does the opposite of imposing restriction. Once pain and want are removed, pleasure can be experienced *in full* – there is no deficit, no higher rung to climb, no transcendent state to achieve. The doctrine does not describe a ceiling; it announces that complete pleasure is available to anyone who removes what stands in its way. The ascetic misreading – shared by Stoic, religious, and some Humanist interpreters who are uncomfortable with Epicurus's frank commitment to pleasure – turns a liberating teaching into a program of self-denial.

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## PD 4

**Bailey:** *"Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh."*[4]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Wishful thinking, obviously false for anyone with serious chronic pain. This is one of Epicurus' weakest and least convincing doctrines.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is providing an empirical, naturalistic account of how pain actually behaves – as the foundation for a *confident* rather than fearful orientation toward bodily suffering. The doctrine does not deny that pain is real or that chronic illness is serious; it calibrates the rational response. The mind virus it targets – shared by Stoic endurance culture and religious suffering-as-virtue frameworks – is the assumption that pain, once present, is total and permanent, which turns manageable suffering into despair. Confidence based on honest observation of nature is Epicurus' answer to both the Stoic's grim endurance and the religious believer's appeal to redemptive suffering.

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## PD 5

**Bailey:** *"It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honourably and justly, [nor again to live a life of prudence, honour, and justice] without living pleasantly."*[5]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus was secretly a Stoic or Kantian – he really believed virtue was intrinsically valuable, and this doctrine proves it. Virtue is sufficient for happiness on his view, and pleasure is incidental.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is saying that virtue and pleasant living are *inseparable in practice* – not that virtue produces happiness independently of pleasure. Virtue is a means, not an end. There is no path to genuine pleasure that bypasses prudence and justice. This makes pleasure the criterion by which virtue is justified, not the other way around. The Stoic and Humanist misreading treats virtue as the goal and pleasure as the byproduct – the exact opposite of what Epicurus says.

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## PD 6

**Bailey:** *"To secure protection from men anything is a natural good, by which you may be able to attain this end."*[6]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus endorses ruthless self-interest, or this minor doctrine is simply a pragmatic observation with no larger philosophical significance.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This doctrine establishes the positive Epicurean justification for social engagement, political prudence, and the cultivation of friendships and alliances – not as external civic duty imposed from above, but as what nature itself directs us toward for the sake of security and ultimately happiness. The misread strips out the phrase "by which you may be able to attain this end," which makes the naturalistic and instrumental basis explicit.[7] Epicurean social life is grounded in nature, not in abstract obligations imported from Stoic cosmopolitanism or Humanist civic idealism.

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## PD 7

**Bailey:** *"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."*[8]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Either a blanket condemnation of fame-seeking that contradicts PD 6, or Epicurus hypocritically endorsing a pursuit he elsewhere dismisses.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is applying a consistent standard: the *instinct* behind the pursuit of fame is natural – it is the desire for security. The question is whether fame actually delivers security in a given case. This is a practical tool for evaluating a common life path against the standard of nature, not a universal prohibition or endorsement. Neither the Stoic's civic duty nor the Humanist's self-actualization narrative is the measure; nature's requirement – security as the foundation of pleasure – is the only relevant criterion.

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## PD 8

**Bailey:** *"No pleasure is a bad thing in itself: but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures."*[9]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** The first clause proves Epicurus approved of unlimited indulgence. "No pleasure is bad in itself" is taken as a license for hedonistic excess.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The second clause is the entire practical content of the doctrine, and it is consistently dropped by those who misuse the first. Pleasures must be evaluated by what they cost in disturbance, anxiety, and consequent pain. The standard is pleasure *net of consequences* – more demanding than either naive hedonism or the ascetic's blanket prohibition. Every tradition that has accused Epicurus of encouraging indulgence has done so by amputating this doctrine at the semicolon.

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## PD 9

**Bailey:** *"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."*[10]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A puzzling abstraction with no clear practical application, usually passed over in silence.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is establishing that differences we experience among pleasures arise from how they vary across time and across the parts of our nature they engage – not from differences in ultimate value or from a hierarchy of "higher" and "lower" pleasures. This directly refutes the Platonic ranking that elevates intellectual pleasures above bodily ones as intrinsically superior, and it equally refutes the hedonistic maximizer's obsession with intensity. All pleasure, as pleasure, is good; what matters is the whole life considered.

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## PD 10

**Bailey:** *"If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky and death and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full with pleasures from every source and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life."*[11]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Either Epicurus secretly approves of debauchery, or he is embarrassedly excusing profligates while really condemning them – a hypocritical hedge.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is identifying *fear* – of death, of divine retribution, of unending pain – as the actual cause of unhappy excess, not pleasure itself. The profligate man's problem is not that he pursues pleasure but

that he pursues it *frantically* because he has never addressed his underlying fears. Remove the fears and the frenzy dissolves. The religious tradition condemns the pleasures; Epicurus identifies the fears behind the frenzy and cures those instead.

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## PD 11

**Bailey:** *"If we were not troubled by our suspicions of the phenomena of the sky and about death, fearing that it concerns us, and also by our failure to grasp the limits of pains and desires, we should have no need of natural science."*[12]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Humanism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** An interesting historical relic, now superseded by modern science, which has made Epicurean natural philosophy obsolete and this doctrine irrelevant.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus explains *why* natural science matters for living well: it dissolves the specific fears – cosmic anxiety, fear of death, fear of unlimited pain and desire – that are the primary enemies of happiness. Modern science has advanced enormously but has not eliminated those fears in most people. The Epicurean application of natural philosophy to *fear specifically* remains as urgent as it was in the fourth century BC. The doctrine is not about accumulating scientific knowledge for its own sake – a Humanist or Skeptical concern – but about using an understanding of nature as the cure for existential dread.

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## PD 12

**Bailey:** *"A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that without natural science it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed."*[13]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** An attack on religion that is either divisively anti-faith or makes philosophy dependent on scientific expertise beyond ordinary people's reach.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** As long as a person believes the universe is governed by beings who may intervene with punishment or reward, complete pleeasure is impossible. Natural philosophy – not scientific credentials, but the basic understanding that the universe operates by nature and not by divine will – is the prerequisite for pleasure that is genuinely unalloyed. This is accessible to any person willing to examine the evidence honestly. The Platonic hidden-world assumption and the religious providential-god assumption are the two specific targets; both produce the same practical result: a life lived in fear of forces beyond one's understanding.

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## PD 13

**Bailey:** *"There is no profit in securing protection in relation to men, if things above and things beneath the earth and indeed all in the boundless universe remain matters of suspicion."*[14]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** An obscure doctrine with no clear modern application; largely ignored in popular presentations of Epicurean philosophy.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This doctrine makes explicit what the surrounding doctrines imply: social security and philosophical understanding are not separate departments. The most comfortable material and social position in the world will not produce happiness if cosmic fear remains. Humanist frameworks that treat happiness as a purely social and material problem – achievable through good institutions, fair treatment, and personal relationships alone – miss this entirely. Epicurus insists that the foundational questions of natural philosophy cannot be sidestepped without cost to the quality of every pleasure.

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## PD 14

**Bailey:** *"The most unalloyed source of protection from men, which is secured to some extent by a certain force of expulsion, is in fact the immunity which results from a quiet life and the retirement from the world."*[15]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** This is the defining Epicurean social teaching: withdraw from public life, retreat to the garden, avoid politics and ambition entirely. The Epicurean ideal is a private, apolitical existence.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This doctrine identifies one *reliable method* of achieving security – not the only one, and not a universal prescription. Read with PD 6, 7, and 13, it is one option in a practical framework whose standard is always security as the foundation of pleasure. Elevating this single doctrine into Epicurus's total social philosophy has produced the caricature of the passive, retreating Epicurean – a distortion eagerly promoted by Stoic and civic Humanist rivals who needed Epicurus to be politically irrelevant.

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## PD 15

**Bailey:** *"The wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity."*[16]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** An ascetic teaching: Epicurus says be content with little, suppress your desires, treat simplicity as a virtue in itself.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The doctrine announces that the finish line is *closer than you think*. Nature's requirements are modest and achievable; only the additions supplied by vain imagination are unlimited and exhausting. This is liberation, not restriction: once you identify what nature actually requires, the path to happiness is easy and already within reach. The mind virus it cures – embedded in Stoic virtue-for-its-own-sake, religious otherworldliness, and the Hu-

manist culture of achievement and recognition – is the belief that "enough" is always just out of reach.

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## PD 16

**Bailey:** *"In but few things chance hinders a wise man, but the greatest and most important matters reason has ordained and throughout the whole period of life does and will ordain."*[17]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Stoic-style *amor fati* – the wise Epicurean passively accepts fortune and endures what fate delivers.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is making a strong, optimistic claim about the power of philosophical living – the opposite of Stoic resignation to fate. The most important things – understanding, friendship, the management of pleasure and pain, freedom from fear – lie substantially within the reach of reason and are not at fortune's mercy. The Skeptic's doubt about the reliability of reason and the Stoic's acceptance of external circumstance both undermine this confidence; Epicurus affirms it as the foundation of a genuinely happy life.

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## PD 17

**Bailey:** *"The just man is most free from trouble, the unjust most full of trouble."*[18]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A moralistic claim that virtue is cosmically rewarded – the kind of statement a Stoic philosopher or religious preacher might make to enforce conventional morality.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is making a psychological and empirical observation: the just man, having no secret wrongs to conceal, lives with a clear mind. The unjust man carries a permanent burden of anxiety. There is no

cosmic reward-and-punishment scheme here – only an accurate description of what injustice actually does to the person who commits it, connecting directly to PD 34 and 35. The Stoic and religious readings import a moral cosmology that Epicurus explicitly rejected; his point is naturalistic and psychological throughout.

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## PD 18

**Bailey:** *"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."*[19]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Bodily pleasures are inherently limited and inferior; Epicurus is directing us away from the body toward the higher pleasures of the mind – confirming the Platonic and religious suspicion of the flesh.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The body, once relieved of want, is *already satisfied*; "more" is variation, not increase. The mind's role is to understand this and thereby dissolve the anxious craving for more that was itself the source of fear. Body and mind together are already complete – this is not a ranking of pleasures but an explanation of how the whole system of pleasure and fear achieves resolution. The Platonic elevation of mind over body and the religious suspicion of the flesh both read into this doctrine an asceticism that is entirely absent from it.

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## PD 19

**Bailey:** *"Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures by reason the limits of pleasure."*[20]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A clever argument against the desire for immortality – interesting philosophically but a minor point compared to the great questions of life and death.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is one of the most revolutionary and consistently overlooked doctrines in the collection. It directly refutes the mind virus at the root of Platonic and religious dissatisfaction with mortal life: the belief that finite existence is inherently deficient and that life is not worth living unless it lasts forever. Epicurus is saying with logical precision that a finite life of pleasure contains *everything* an infinite one would. The whole architecture of Platonic otherworldliness and religious promises of eternal life rests on the assumption that this doctrine destroys.

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## PD 20

**Bailey:** *"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."*[21]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** "Epicurus says enough is enough" – modest contentment with a finite life, a philosophical shrug in the face of mortality.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The doctrine makes a claim about genuine *completeness*, not modest resignation. The wise man approaching death does not feel that the best life is still lacking anything. The Platonic mind virus – that a finite life is inherently incomplete, that we are always still reaching for something more – is precisely what this doctrine refutes. Stoic endurance and religious hope for an afterlife are both responses to the same false premise: that mortal life falls short. Epicurus dissolves the premise rather than offering a coping strategy for it.

⁂

## PD 21

**Bailey:** *"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."*[22]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Humanism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is telling people not to compete or strive – a prescription for passivity and anti-ambition.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The doctrine is not a prohibition of competition but a liberation from *unnecessary* competition. Once you understand what actually makes life complete – and how accessible it is – obsessive competitive pursuit of more becomes unnecessary, not forbidden. The *because* is everything: the freedom from competition flows from philosophical understanding, not from a rule against striving. The Humanist drive for achievement and the Stoic drive for virtue-through-effort both assume a kind of insufficiency that Epicurus is here dissolving.

⁂

## PD 22

**Bailey:** *"We must consider both the real purpose and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion."*[23]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A dry methodological note – the kind of procedural reminder philosophers add to arguments to sound rigorous, with no practical bearing on how to live.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This doctrine establishes the entire Epicurean epistemological framework: sensation is the non-negotiable foundation to which all reasoning must return. Clever arguments that contradict what the senses plainly show us must be rejected regardless of their logical form. This is

the cornerstone of a philosophy that explicitly rejects both Platonic rationalism – mind trumps senses – and Academic Skepticism – nothing can be known with confidence. The practical stakes are enormous: without this foundation, every judgment about how to live is unmoored.

⁂

## PD 23

**Bailey:** *"If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false."*[24]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A minor technical point in ancient epistemology debates, irrelevant to practical Epicurean ethics and living.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is a direct and devastating refutation of both Platonic rationalism and Academic Skepticism. You cannot coherently reject all sensation, because even the judgment that some sensations are false must rest on *other* sensations as the standard. The mind is not more trustworthy than the senses – this is one of the deepest mind viruses in Western philosophy, one that Plato installed at the foundation of the tradition and that Descartes later reinforced. Epicurus targets it with logical precision: fight all sensation and you have destroyed the only standard by which any claim, including your own skeptical one, can be evaluated.

⁂

## PD 24

**Bailey:** *"If you reject any single sensation and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion as to the appearance awaiting confirmation and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations as well with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment."*[25]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Technical Epicurean epistemology of interest only to specialists, with no practical bearing on how to live or how to understand the main doctrines.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** If you begin selectively overriding sensory evidence with opinion – even in apparently small cases – you have undermined your only reliable standard for everything. Epicurean epistemology is not one philosophical option among others; the alternatives lead necessarily to total cognitive collapse. Every system that invites you to distrust your senses in favor of reason, revelation, or abstract principle – Platonism, Academic Skepticism, supernatural religion – begins precisely with this move. Epicurus identifies it as the epistemological root of all the subsequent errors.

⁂

## PD 25

**Bailey:** *"If on each occasion instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other nearer standard when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles."*[26]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Buddhism / Humanism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** The "end of nature" is *tranquility* (*ataraxia*) – Epicurus is fundamentally a philosopher of calm detachment, comparable to the Stoics or Buddhists. Pleasure is a means; freedom from disturbance is the real goal.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The end of nature is *pleasure* – which Epicurus states explicitly and repeatedly throughout his writings. This single substitution – tranquility for pleasure as the goal – is the most damaging misreading in the entire tradition, and it has been actively promoted by Stoic, Buddhist, Humanist, and religious interpreters who find pleasure as the declared goal of life embarrassing or subversive. If the goal is tranquility, the Epicurean looks like a Stoic or Buddhist – minimizing desire, seeking detachment, valuing equanimity above enjoyment. If the goal is pleasure – which is what Epicurus said – the picture is active, positive, and fully engaged with the world. Every action and avoid-

ance must be referred to *pleasure* as the standard; substituting any other standard corrupts the whole system from its foundation.

⁂

## PD 26

**Bailey:** *"Of desires, all that do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary, but involve a craving which is easily dispelled, when the object is hard to procure or they seem likely to produce harm."*[27]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is teaching desire reduction – identify your unnecessary desires and suppress them, as an ascetic or Stoic would suppress attachments to externals.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The doctrine provides a *practical decision tool*, not a moral prohibition. Desires that cause no pain when unmet, and whose objects are hard to obtain or likely to produce harm, are simply not worth the cost – not because pleasure is suspect, but because the cost exceeds the benefit. Non-necessary desires are not condemned; they require careful evaluation before pursuit. The entire analytical framework serves pleasure by helping us spend effort where the real returns are. The Stoic and religious misreadings both import the assumption that desire itself is the problem; for Epicurus, desire is natural and good – only poor management of it leads to trouble.

⁂

## PD 27

**Bailey:** *"Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship."*[28]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** This proves Epicurus was "not really a selfish hedonist after all" – friendship's importance shows he secretly valued altruism over self-interest, and readers should look past his hedonism to the more respectable philosophy underneath.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Friendship is the greatest good *because* it is the greatest source of stable and enduring pleasure – not because it contradicts or redeems the Epicurean commitment to pleasure. For Epicurus, genuine care for others and the pursuit of one's own happiness are not in conflict; they are mutually reinforcing. The misreading – enthusiastically promoted by Humanist and religious interpreters who want to rescue Epicurus from "hedonism" – smuggles in a framework that sets self-interest and care for others in opposition, a conflict Epicurus saw no reason to accept. Friendship is the crowning expression of Epicurean philosophy, not a concession away from it.

⁂

## PD 28

**Bailey:** *"The same conviction which has given us confidence that there is nothing terrible that lasts forever or even for long, has also seen the protection of friendship most fully completed in the limited evils of this life."*[29]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** An obscure and puzzling connection between physics and friendship; usually passed over without comment even by sympathetic readers.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This doctrine makes explicit the direct link between *natural philosophy* and the flourishing of *friendship*. It is because the Epicurean has understood – through the study of nature – that no evil is eternal, that he can commit fully to friendship without the dread of permanent loss hovering over every relationship. Natural philosophy and ethics are not separate departments of Epicurean thought; they are organically connected. The Platonic and religious assumptions that evil may be eternal, and that death is a real and permanent loss to the dead, are precisely what make deep friendship so fragile for those who hold them.

⁂

## PD 29

**Bailey:** *"Among desires some are natural (and necessary, some natural) but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, but due to idle imagination."*[30]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** This classification ranks desires on a ladder of approval, with necessary desires permitted, natural-but-not-necessary desires borderline, and all others to be suppressed. Epicurus is prescribing systematic desire reduction.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is an *analytical tool* for evaluating the cost-benefit of particular pursuits, not a moral ranking or a program of self-denial. Necessary desires must be met; natural-but-not-necessary desires may be pursued freely when they lead to more pleasure than pain; only the third category – driven by idle imagination – reliably leads to trouble because its objects are inherently unlimited and therefore impossible to obtain. The framework serves pleasure by providing clarity about where effort is well spent. The ascetic misreading – promoted across Stoic, religious, and some Humanist lines – turns a practical diagnostic into a prescription for the very self-denial Epicurus was opposing.

⁂

## PD 30

**Bailey:** *"Wherever in the case of desires which are physical, but do not lead to a sense of pain, if they are not fulfilled, the effort is intense, such pleasures are due to idle imagination, and it is not owing to their own nature that they fail to be dispelled, but owing to the empty imaginings of the man."*[31]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus distrusted the body and thought most physical desires were illusory or dangerous – confirming the Platonic and religious suspicion of bodily appetite.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is making a diagnostic point about the *cause* of intense, hard-to-satisfy physical cravings: they are driven by the mind's empty imaginings, not by genuine bodily need. The body's natural requirements are relatively simple; it is the mind's fantasies – conditioned by culture, status anxiety, and the vain desires of idle imagination – that turn them into obsessions. The cure is philosophical understanding of where the intensity is actually coming from, not the bodily suppression that Platonism and religion recommend.

⁂

## PD 31

**Bailey:** *"The justice which arises from nature is a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and save them from being harmed."*[32]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Crude contractarianism – cynical proof that Epicurus had no real ethics, only enlightened self-interest dressed in philosophical language.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is being accurate, not cynical. Justice grounded in actual mutual human advantage is *more* binding and *more* honest than justice grounded in divine command or Platonic Form – because it is rooted in something that actually exists and that all parties have genuine reason to care about. The misread assumes that only cosmic or transcendent grounding can make ethics real – an assumption shared by Platonism, supernatural religion, and some strands of Humanism. Epicurus rejects that assumption, and with it the need for any external authority to make justice binding.

⁂

## PD 32

**Bailey:** *"For all living things which have not been able to make compacts not to harm one another or be harmed, nothing ever is either just or unjust; and likewise*

*too for all tribes of men which have been unable or unwilling to make compacts not to harm one another or be harmed."*[33]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Humanism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus had no concern for animals, future generations, or the natural world – justice applies only among beings capable of formal contracts, making everything else morally irrelevant.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The doctrine defines the *domain of the concept of justice* – which requires reciprocal agreement as its basis – not the full scope of Epicurean concern for other living things. Determining where the specific concept of justice applies is not the same as declaring that everything outside that domain is of no account. The Humanist and Stoic readings import modern concerns about ecological and universal ethics into a doctrine that is simply being precise about the meaning of one concept.

⁂

## PD 33

**Bailey:** *"Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another in any place whatever and at any time it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed."*[34]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Moral relativism or nihilism – Epicurus says justice has no real existence, which means there are no genuine ethical standards and anything can be justified.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is an explicit rejection of Platonic essentialism about justice – justice is not a Form, a cosmic principle, or a divine decree existing independently of human life. But that does not make it arbitrary or unreal. A compact *in human life* is profoundly real and binding. Epicurus is doing away with the metaphysical inflation of justice while preserving and fully grounding its actual importance. Anti-Platonism about ethics is not ethical relativism; it is the removal of a false foundation that was never needed.

⁂

## PD 34

**Bailey:** *"Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which attaches to the apprehension of being unable to escape those appointed to punish such actions."*[35]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** "Epicurus says the only reason not to do wrong is fear of getting caught" – a permission slip for careful wrongdoing, and proof that Epicurean ethics has no genuine moral content.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Read with PD 17 and 35, this is a sophisticated psychological analysis: the wrongdoer lives with permanent, rational anxiety because he can never be certain of escaping detection. The "fear of punishment" is not an external deterrent added to otherwise neutral actions; it is an internal condition that corrodes the unjust person's entire life. The doctrine explains why injustice is *self-destructive from within*, not merely risky from without. The Stoic's intrinsic wrongness of injustice and the religious sinner's fear of divine judgment are both replaced by something more real, naturalistic, and more psychologically precise.

⁂

## PD 35

**Bailey:** *"It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed, to be confident that he will escape detection, even if at present he escapes a thousand times. For up to the time of death it cannot be certain that he will indeed escape."*[36]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A weak and unconvincing deterrent argument – Epicurus says you might eventually get caught, far less compelling than the Stoic's intrinsic wrongness of injustice or the religious threat of divine judgment.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The anxiety of the secret wrongdoer is *permanent and rationally ineliminable* – death is the only termination of the uncertainty, and not even a thousand successful evasions dissolves the underlying dread. This completes the analysis of PD 34: injustice is a permanent psychological burden that destroys the peace of mind it often set out to secure. The naturalistic account of why justice matters is not weaker than Stoic or religious alternatives; it is stronger because it is more honest and more accurate about what actually happens inside a person who acts unjustly.

⁂

## PD 36

**Bailey:** *"In its general aspect justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another: but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country or any other circumstances the same thing does not turn out to be just for all."*[37]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Moral relativism – Epicurus says justice varies by circumstance, therefore there is no universal standard and ethical claims are merely expressions of local convention.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The *basis* of justice – mutual advantage – is universal and the same for all people everywhere. The *specific applications* vary with circumstances. This is not relativism; it is the reasonable recognition that the same universal principle yields different concrete rules under different conditions. Context-sensitivity grounded in a universal principle is the opposite of abandoning standards, and it requires no Stoic cosmic reason or divine law to give it universal force.

⁂

## PD 37

**Bailey:** *"Among actions which are sanctioned as just by law, that which is proved on examination to be of advantage in the requirements of men's dealings with one*

*another, has the guarantee of justice, whether it is the same for all or not. But if a man makes a law and it does not turn out to lead to advantage in men's dealings with each other, then it no longer has the essential nature of justice."*[38]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Humanism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Legal positivism – whatever the law says is just, making Epicurus a rubber stamp for existing authority; or alternatively, legal nihilism – Epicurus undermines the authority of law entirely.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Laws are just only when – and only so long as – they serve genuine mutual human advantage. A law that fails this test lacks the essential nature of justice *regardless of its formal status*. Far from being permissive, this standard is more demanding than divine-command or positivist theories of law. It provides a principled criterion – grounded in actual human life, requiring no divine sanction or Stoic cosmic order – against which any law can be evaluated and found wanting.



## PD 38

**Bailey:** *"Where, provided the circumstances have not been altered, actions which were considered just, have been shown not to accord with the general concept in actual practice, then they are not just. But where, when circumstances have changed, the same actions which were sanctioned as just no longer lead to advantage, there they were just at the time when they were of advantage for the dealings of fellow-citizens with one another, but subsequently they are no longer just, when no longer of advantage."*[39]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Further proof of moral relativism – what was just yesterday may not be just today, confirming that Epicurus had no real ethical principles, only situational convenience.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Justice is not relativized to preference or culture; it tracks the real, changing conditions of mutual human advantage. When those conditions change, the just action changes – not because justice is

arbitrary, but because it is grounded in something real that itself changes. Responsiveness to reality is not the abandonment of principle; it is the application of principle to circumstances as they actually are. The Platonic Forms and divine commandments that Epicurus rejects here do not change – but they also have no connection to actual human life, which is why they fail as foundations for a living ethics.

⁂

## PD 39

**Bailey:** *"The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself and the rest at least not alien: but with all to which he could not do even this he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus."*[40]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Stoic-style indifference – accept what you cannot change, endure what you must, withdraw inward to the realm of will and virtue where external circumstances cannot touch you.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The Epicurean wise man does not passively accept circumstances; he actively *orders* them – cultivating what can be incorporated into his life and deliberately expelling what cannot. This is not resignation; it is the intentional management of one's environment and relationships in the service of pleasure and the removal of disquiet. The active and selective character of the doctrine – *ordering*, *making akin*, *expelling* – is entirely unlike Stoic indifference, which retreats inward and accepts the external. Epicurus stays engaged with the world and reshapes what he can.

⁂

## PD 40

**Bailey:** *"As many as possess the power to procure complete immunity from their neighbours, these also live most pleasantly with one another, since they have the*

*most certain pledge of security, and after they have enjoyed the fullest intimacy, they do not lament the previous departure of a dead friend, as though he were to be pitied."*[41]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** The final clause – not lamenting a dead friend *as though he were to be pitied* – shows Epicurus was cold and emotionally detached, confirming the picture of the garden recluse who has withdrawn from genuine human feeling.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is the culmination of the entire philosophical system applied to the most intimate human experience. A community of people who have achieved security through philosophy, who have lived in the fullest friendship, and who face loss *without being shattered* – not because they did not care, but because they understood. The Epicurean does not mourn the dead friend *as though he were to be pitied* because he knows, from PD 2 and the whole of Epicurean natural philosophy, that the dissolved person has nothing to suffer. Love and philosophy are not in conflict; together they produce the only genuinely complete human life. The Stoic endures loss through self-command; the religious believer hopes for reunion beyond death; the Epicurean grieves without despair because understanding has already done its work.

⁂

*All Bailey translations are from Cyril Bailey, "Epicurus: The Extant Remains" (Oxford, 1926). The interpretations on this page reflect the editorial perspective of EpicurusToday.com, with particular attention to adulterations introduced through Stoicism, Academic Skepticism, Platonism, Supernatural Religion, and Humanism. For the broader context of these misreadings, see the Mind Viruses article.*

⁂

## Part Two: The Vatican Sayings

The *Vatican Sayings* are a collection of approximately eighty aphorisms from Epicurus and his close associates, discovered in a Vatican manuscript in 1888 and translated by Cyril Bailey in *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford, 1926).

They are less widely known than the forty *Principal Doctrines* but contain some of Epicurus' most direct and personal expressions of his philosophy – on friendship, pleasure, death, old age, self-sufficiency, and the practical management of desire.

Like the Principal Doctrines, they have been consistently misread through Stoic, Platonic, religious, Humanist, and Skeptical lenses. Several sayings duplicate or closely parallel the Principal Doctrines; in those cases a cross-reference is provided rather than a full repeated analysis.

A note on attribution: Bailey and subsequent scholars have identified that a small number of sayings in the collection come from Epicurus' associates (principally Metrodorus) rather than from Epicurus himself. Those cases are noted where relevant.

**Editorial note:** Bailey's translations of the Vatican Sayings are verified less frequently in modern scholarship than his translations of the Principal Doctrines. All Bailey translations below should be carefully verified against Bailey's 1926 text.

The Bailey translations used here are from Cyril Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford, 1926).

⁂

## VS 1

**Bailey:** *"The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour. For all such things exist only in the weak."*[42]

**Note:** This saying is identical to Principal Doctrine 1.[43]

⁂

## VS 4

**Bailey:** *"All bodily suffering is negligible: for that which causes acute pain has short duration, and that which endures long in the flesh causes but mild pain."*[44]

**Note:** This saying closely parallels Principal Doctrine 4.[45] See that entry for full analysis. The key misreading in both cases is dismissing this as wishful thinking rather than recognizing it as an empirical observation designed to ground a confident rather than fearful orientation toward bodily pain.

⁂

## VS 7

**Bailey:** *"It is hard for an evil-doer to escape detection, but to obtain security for escaping is impossible."*[46]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A weak deterrent – Epicurus is warning wrongdoers that they will probably get caught, which is far less compelling than the Stoic's claim that injustice is intrinsically wrong or the religious threat of divine judgment.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying extends the analysis of Principal Doctrines 34 and 35 in its most compact form. The point is not merely that detection is likely but that *certainty of escape is impossible* – and that this impossibility is a permanent psychological condition, not a remote statistical risk. The unjust man cannot rest, because he cannot achieve the security that is the precondition of happiness. This is more honest and more accurate than either the Stoic's appeal to virtue's intrinsic nobility or the religious believer's appeal to divine judgment – both of which locate the sanction of justice outside the natural consequences of the act itself.

⁂

## VS 9

**Bailey:** *"Necessity is an evil, but there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity."*[47]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A Stoic-flavored call to accept fate – Epicurus is counseling inner freedom in the face of external constraints, in the manner of

Epictetus. Or alternatively, it is read as a trivial wordplay with no philosophical depth.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying is an assertion of real, practical freedom – not the Stoic's inward acceptance of external fate but the Epicurean's active reorganization of life to minimize genuine necessities. Epicurus is saying that the constraints of necessity are real and are evil (contra the Stoic who denies externals are evils at all), but that philosophy equips us to live in a way that reduces our exposure to them. The saying targets both the fatalist who accepts all constraints as given and the anxious overreacher who multiplies necessities by multiplying desires.

⁂

## VS 10

**Bailey:** *"Remember that you are of mortal nature and have a limited time to live and have devoted yourself to discussions on nature for all time and eternity and have seen 'things that are now and are to come and have been.'"*[48]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Platonism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A memento mori in the religious or Stoic tradition – Epicurus is reminding us of death to humble us, or to encourage us to make the most of limited time in a spirit of urgency or piety.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The point is the opposite of religious humbling. Epicurus is affirming that through the study of nature a mortal person has already grasped *the whole of things* – past, present, and future – in the way that only understanding makes possible. Mortality is not a limitation to be mourned but the very condition in which a finite life has achieved something genuinely complete. This connects directly to Principal Doctrines 19 and 20: infinite time adds nothing that natural philosophy and understanding have not already provided.

⁂

## VS 11

**Bailey:** *"For most men rest is stagnation and activity madness."*[49]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus endorses a middle path of moderate activity – neither idle nor frantic – in the manner of Aristotle's golden mean or a Humanist work-life balance.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is a sharp diagnosis of a common failure mode, not a prescription for moderation. Most people oscillate between two forms of unhappiness: the torpor of rest without purpose and the frenzy of activity driven by vain desire and fear rather than genuine enjoyment. The Epicurean alternative is not a midpoint on that spectrum but a *different orientation entirely* – purposeful engagement grounded in pleasure and understanding rather than restlessness or compulsion. The saying targets the Humanist assumption that the problem of a well-lived life is finding the right amount of productivity.

⁂

## VS 14

**Bailey:** *"We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not (master) of to-morrow, postpone your happiness: life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us dies without allowing himself leisure."*[50]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Stoicism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A piece of motivational wisdom – don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today; enjoy life while you can. Sometimes read as a Stoic *carpe diem* in the manner of Horace.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying is doing far more precise philosophical work than motivational advice. The key phrase is "not master of tomorrow" – the person who postpones happiness is acting as though future time

will provide what present time cannot, which is exactly the mind virus that Principal Doctrines 19 and 20 target.[51] The problem is not laziness but the philosophical error of locating happiness in a future that may never arrive rather than in the present that is already available. Supernatural religion compounds this by postponing happiness to an afterlife; Platonism postpones it to a higher realm of being. Epicurus says happiness is here, now, or it is nowhere.

⁂

## VS 15

**Bailey:** *"We value our characters as something peculiar to ourselves, whether they are good and we are esteemed by men, or not; so ought we to value the characters of others, if they are well-disposed to us."*[52]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is teaching a form of self-respect and respect for others based on character – in the Stoic manner of valuing virtue regardless of external opinion.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is not about valuing character for its own sake in the Stoic manner but about the reciprocal basis of genuine friendship and good relations. We claim our own characters as genuinely ours – they are part of what makes us who we are – and we must extend the same recognition to those who are well-disposed toward us. This is the naturalistic foundation of the Epicurean community: mutual recognition of character within bonds of real affection and shared philosophy, not the Stoic's abstract respect for virtue in isolation from personal attachment.

⁂

## VS 16

**Bailey:** *"No one when he sees evil deliberately chooses it, but is enticed by it as being good in comparison with a greater evil and so pursues it."*[53]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A moral psychology observation borrowed from Plato's *Protagoras* – no one does wrong willingly; evil-doing is a form of ignorance. Therefore the cure is knowledge (Platonic) or grace (religious).

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus reaches a conclusion similar on the surface to Plato's claim but for entirely different reasons and with entirely different implications. The lure is not abstract ignorance of the Good but the practical comparison of apparent goods and evils in the moment of choice. The person who chooses wrongly is not lacking access to Platonic Forms or divine grace; he is making a bad calculation about what actually produces more pleasure than pain. The cure is not intellectual access to a higher truth but practical philosophical training in evaluating real consequences – exactly what Epicurean philosophy provides.

⁂

## VS 17

**Bailey:** *"It is not the young man who should be thought happy, but an old man who has lived a good life. For the young man at the height of his powers is unstable and is carried this way and that by fortune, like a headlong stream. But the old man has come to anchor in old age as though in port, and the good things for which before he hardly hoped he has brought into safe harbourage in his grateful recollections."*[54]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is counseling acceptance of aging and finding consolation in memory – a Stoic or religious resignation to decline, or a Humanist celebration of wisdom in old age.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying makes a precise point that cuts against every framework that locates happiness in peak physical powers, worldly achievement, or youthful vitality. The old man who has lived well is *more* happy, not consoled despite being less happy – because he has accumulated understanding, stable friendships, and a store of genuine pleasures that fortune can no longer easily disturb. The harbour metaphor is active and triumphant, not resigned. What the young man at the mercy of fortune cannot yet possess, the

philosophically trained old man has fully secured. This is the practical reward of Epicurean living made visible.

⁂

## VS 18

**Bailey:** *"Remove sight, association, and contact, and the passion of love is at an end."*[55]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A cynical reduction of romantic love to mere physical proximity – Epicurus is dismissing love as nothing more than stimulation and habit, confirming the materialist's inability to account for genuine human emotion. Or alternatively, he is counseling suppression of passion in the manner of an ascetic.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is a precise naturalistic analysis of how passionate love is sustained – and therefore how to end one that is causing harm. Love of this kind is not sustained by something metaphysical or transcendent (contra Plato's *Symposium*, where love is the soul's ascent toward the eternal) but by the ongoing stimuli of sight, proximity, and contact. The practical implication is not cynicism but manageability: a passion that is disrupting one's life and causing greater pain than pleasure – the test of VS 51 and PD 8 – can be brought to an end by removing what feeds it. This does not condemn love; it identifies love's natural mechanism and places it within the person's practical control. The Platonic reading, which locates love in the soul's participation in eternal beauty, makes it both exalted and unmanageable; Epicurus makes it both real and governable.

⁂

## VS 19

**Bailey:** *"Forgetting the good that has been, he has become old this very day."*[56]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A conventional observation about the importance of gratitude and memory for maintaining a youthful spirit – compatible with any philosophy that counsels appreciation of life's blessings or Stoic present-moment awareness.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying applies the therapeutic practice of VS 55 directly to aging. Psychological aging – the real aging that matters – is not primarily a physical process but the *forgetting of genuine goods already possessed*. The person who has lost access to the real pleasures of his past through inattention or ingratitude has aged in the sense that counts, regardless of his physical years. The counterpart is VS 17's old man who has brought the goods of his life "into safe harbourage in his grateful recollections" – he is genuinely rich and genuinely at peace.[57] This is not a sentimental counsel to "stay young at heart" but a precise statement about where the resources for happiness in later life actually come from: not from new acquisitions or continued physical powers, but from the real and permanently possessed store of genuine pleasures that philosophical living accumulates.

⁂

## VS 21

**Bailey:** *"We must not violate nature, but obey her; and we shall obey her if we fulfil the necessary desires and also the physical, if they bring no harm to us, but sternly reject the harmful."*[58]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** "Obeying nature" is read in the Stoic sense of living according to reason as the highest natural faculty, or in the religious sense of accepting a divinely ordered natural law. Either way, Epicurus sounds like he is prescribing self-denial under a higher authority.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Obeying nature here means following what the body and mind genuinely require for pleasure – satisfying necessary and harmless desires, and rejecting only what harms us. The authority is not reason as a Stoic cosmic faculty or divine law but the actual felt experience of pleasure and pain that nature provides as our guide. This is not self-denial but accurate

self-management: the standard is pleasure and the avoidance of harm, not duty or virtue for its own sake.

⁂

## VS 23

**Bailey:** *"All friendship is desirable in itself, though it starts from the need of help."*[59]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** The second clause is used to dismiss Epicurean friendship as ultimately selfish – it begins in need, which proves that Epicurus could not really value friendship for its own sake. The first clause is then treated as an afterthought or a contradiction.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is making a developmental observation, not a reductive one. Friendships begin in the practical soil of mutual need – this is honest and naturalistic – and then grow into something that is genuinely valued for its own sake. This is no more "merely selfish" than the observation that children begin by needing food and then develop the capacity for full human flourishing. The Stoic and Humanist misreading imports the assumption that anything that begins in self-interest is tainted throughout; Epicurus sees no such contradiction because for him the movement from need to genuine affection is entirely natural and admirable.

⁂

## VS 25

**Bailey:** *"Poverty, when measured by the natural purpose of life, is great wealth, but unlimited wealth is great poverty."*[60]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Ascetic praise of poverty – Epicurus is saying that having little is virtuous and that the wealthy are to be pitied, in the manner of Diogenes the Cynic or a religious believer holding the world in contempt.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The criterion is not poverty as such but nature's actual standard for a complete life. When measured against that standard, a person with few possessions but genuine pleasures, security, and friendship is rich in every way that matters. The person with unlimited wealth who still lacks the understanding to enjoy it, who is driven by vain desire for more, and who cannot be secure, is poor in every way that matters. This is not praise of poverty or condemnation of wealth but a clarification of the standard: nature, not social convention or religious virtue, is the measure. A wealthy Epicurean who enjoys his wealth in the right way is not condemned by this saying.

⁂

## VS 26

**Bailey:** *"You must understand that whether the discourse be long or short it tends to the same end."*[61]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Humanism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A pragmatic note about rhetorical flexibility – Epicurus is being tolerant of different communication styles, confirming a Humanist appreciation for diverse forms of intellectual expression.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is a statement about *purpose*, not style. Whether a discourse is a long treatise or a short aphorism, the end is always the same: the elimination of the fears and false beliefs that make people miserable and the delivery of the understanding that produces genuine pleasure. This connects directly to VS 29's rejection of elaborate discourse designed for popular praise, and to Epicurus' own practice of writing both the long letters preserved in Diogenes Laertius and the compact Principal Doctrines. The "same end" is the philosophical cure – and that end is never intellectual performance, literary achievement, or Humanist cultivation for its own sake. The Skeptical tradition, which uses long argument to dissolve all certainty, and the Humanist tradition, which values eloquence as an end, both miss what Epicurus is saying: length is irrelevant; only the therapeutic result matters.

⁂

## VS 27

**Bailey:** *"In all other occupations the fruit comes painfully after completion, but in philosophy pleasure goes hand in hand with knowledge; for enjoyment does not follow comprehension, but comprehension and enjoyment are simultaneous."*[62]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus sounds like Plato here – knowledge is the highest pleasure, confirming that the life of the mind is superior to bodily experience. Or this is read as Epicurus endorsing the Humanist ideal of intellectual cultivation as the best life.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The point is not that intellectual pleasure is highest but that philosophical understanding is unusual among human activities in being pleasurable *as it happens*, not only after completion. Most productive work involves present labor for future reward; philosophy delivers pleasure in the very act of understanding. This is an argument for *starting* to philosophize – the entry cost is low and the reward is immediate – not an argument that philosophy ranks above bodily pleasures in some Platonic hierarchy. Epicurus is advertising the accessibility of philosophical pleasure, not elevating it above all other goods.

⁂

## VS 28

**Bailey:** *"We must not approve either those who are always ready for friendship, or those who hang back, but for friendship's sake we must even run risks."*[63]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is simply recommending a middle course between social over-eagerness and excessive caution – a prudent social moderation in the Aristotelian manner.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The final clause – "for friendship's sake we must even run risks" – is the entire point and is exactly what the moderation reading misses.[64] Epicurus is not recommending careful calibration but *willing-*

*ness to commit*. Friendship is so central to the complete life that hesitancy born of self-protective caution is itself a failure. The person who "hangs back" is protecting himself from exposure at the cost of the greatest good. Real friendship requires a genuine stake – and Epicurus explicitly endorses accepting that risk.

⁂

## VS 29

**Bailey:** *"In investigating nature I would prefer to speak openly and like an oracle to give answers serviceable to all mankind, even though no one should understand me, rather than to conform to popular opinions and so win the praise freely scattered by the mob."*[65]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Humanism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is being arrogant – he places his own esoteric wisdom above popular understanding, confirming the image of the philosopher who retreats from the world. Or alternatively, he is displaying a Humanist skepticism toward mass opinion.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying reflects Epicurus' deep conviction that the truth about nature – though difficult and unfamiliar – is what actually sets people free from fear and misery, and that popular frameworks (whether religious, Platonic, or merely conventional) are the source of the mind viruses that poison human life. The oracle image is not arrogance but a statement of priority: healing truth over comfortable agreement. Epicurus wrote his philosophy for *everyone* – the famous Diogenes of Oinoanda inscription broadcast it to all who passed – but he would not corrupt the medicine to make it more palatable.

⁂

## VS 31

**Bailey:** *"Against all else it is possible to provide security, but as against death all of us mortals alike dwell in an unfortified city."*[66]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Platonism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A fatalistic admission that death defeats us all – Epicurus is counseling brave acceptance of mortality in the Stoic manner, or this is taken as a concession that ultimately grounds the need for religious hope.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is not a counsel of resignation but a clear-eyed observation that serves the argument of Principal Doctrine 2.[67] *Because* we all dwell equally in this unfortified city, the attempt to secure oneself against death through religion, social status, or any external means is futile. The only rational response is the one Epicurus always provides: understand that death is nothing to us, that the dissolved person has no sensation, and that the fear of death – not death itself – is the enemy. The unfortified city is a call to philosophy, not to hope or endurance.

⁂

## VS 32

**Bailey:** *"The veneration of the wise man is a great blessing to those who venerate him."*[68]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is promoting deference to authority in the manner of religious veneration – a contradiction of his empirical, anti-authoritarian epistemology.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The blessing is practical and naturalistic. The person who genuinely venerates a wise man – not in the manner of a disciple submitting to a guru but in the manner of someone who truly studies and models a life well-lived – has access to a living demonstration of what philosophy makes possible. Epicurus himself lived this way and was described by his students in the warmest terms. The saying is not about authority but about the real benefit of having a philosophical exemplar in one's community. The Stoic misread imports the idea of veneration-as-duty; the correct reading is veneration-as-practical-benefit.

⁂

## VS 33

**Bailey:** *"The flesh cries out to be saved from hunger, thirst and cold. For if a man possess this safety and hope to possess it, he might rival even Zeus in happiness."*[69]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is setting a remarkably low bar – mere food, drink, and warmth are sufficient for happiness. This either confirms the ascetic reading (happiness requires almost nothing) or is dismissed as naive by anyone who has experienced the complexity of human desire.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is one of the most radical in the collection precisely because it is not ascetic but *liberating*. The bar is not set low as a counsel of deprivation but as a demonstration of how close the foundation of happiness actually is. What the flesh genuinely requires is modest and achievable; the problem is that most people never secure even this because they are pursuing vain additions to it rather than consolidating the real foundation. The phrase "and hope to possess it" is the crucial addition: security in the basics, not the basics alone, is what rivals Zeus.[70] This is Principal Doctrine 15 in its most vivid form.[71]

⁂

## VS 34

**Bailey:** *"It is not so much our friends' help that helps us as the confidence of their help."*[72]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A cynical reduction of friendship to utility – what we really want from friends is the feeling of security they provide, not the friends themselves. This appears to confirm the critique that Epicurean friendship is ultimately selfish.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying is a precise psychological observation about how friendship actually produces its greatest benefit, not a reduc-

tion of friendship to mere utility. The confidence that a friend would help if needed is a constant and ongoing source of pleasure and security – it operates continuously, not only in emergencies. A person who knows he has genuine friends is less fearful, more at ease, and more capable of enjoying his life than someone who lacks that knowledge. This is why Epicurus calls friendship the greatest of all the goods wisdom provides. The "confidence of help" is not a substitute for the friend; it is what makes the friendship a living source of happiness rather than a merely theoretical good.

⁂

## VS 35

**Bailey:** *"We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune."*[73]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A piece of contentment advice – appreciate what you have, don't be greedy. Often treated as interchangeable with Stoic acceptance of one's lot or religious gratitude for blessings received.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying is a practical application of the Epicurean analysis of vain desire, not a counsel of grateful passivity. The point is not merely that gratitude is virtuous but that the failure to recognize present goods as genuine – because we are always focused on what we lack – is a *cognitive error* with real costs. What we now have was once hoped for and is therefore genuinely good; treating it as insufficient because something more is imaginable is not ambition but the engine of permanent dissatisfaction. The remedy is not Stoic indifference to all possessions but accurate recognition of real pleasures already possessed.

⁂

## VS 37

**Bailey:** *"Nature is weak towards evil, not towards good: because it is saved by pleasures, but destroyed by pains."*[74]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is saying that human nature is naturally inclined toward vice and weakness – a pessimistic anthropology compatible with religious doctrines of fallen human nature or the Stoic view that nature requires reason to correct its animal inclinations.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is making the opposite point with equal force. Nature is *saved* by pleasures – pleasure is the natural condition of a life going well, the body's and mind's signal of health and satisfaction. Pain is what destroys nature. This is not pessimism about human nature; it is an affirmation that our natural orientation toward pleasure is correct and that the philosophical task is not to overcome nature but to understand it well enough to follow it accurately. The traditions that treat human nature as requiring correction – whether through reason, revelation, or virtue – are the ones this saying directly opposes.



## VS 38

**Bailey:** *"He is a little man in all respects who has many good reasons for quitting life."*[75]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A condemnation of suicide that aligns with religious or conventional moral prohibitions on taking one's own life.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus was not categorically opposed to voluntary departure from life in extreme circumstances – he acknowledged it could be rational. The saying is targeting something more specific: the person who *accumulates reasons* to quit life as a habit of mind, who frames everything as a burden, who treats the present as an obstacle rather than a source of genuine good. Such a person is philosophically diminished – "little in all respects" – not because he sins against life but because he has failed to understand and use what life actually offers. The Stoic "open door" doctrine – Seneca's and Epictetus' teaching that the wise man retains voluntary departure as a permanent rational option, and that this availability is itself a source of freedom – can be misapplied

to this saying, as though Epicurus were setting a criterion for when the door should legitimately be opened. But that is not what the saying is doing. Epicurus is not calibrating the threshold for rational exit; he is diagnosing the fearful, complaint-ridden orientation that has never learned to live well enough to make the question urgent in the first place.

⁂

## VS 39

**Bailey:** *"He is no friend who is continually asking for help, nor he who never associates help with friendship. For the former barters kindly feeling for a practical return and the latter destroys the hope of good in the future."*[76]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A social etiquette point – don't be a burden on friends, but also don't be too proud to accept help. Epicurus is describing good social manners in the manner of Aristotle's discussion of friendship.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is defining the *nature* of Epicurean friendship by its failures on both sides. The one who only asks for help reduces friendship to transaction; the one who never allows help to enter the picture severs the bond of genuine mutual care that makes friendship what it is. Both failures destroy what VS 34 identifies as friendship's greatest practical gift: the *confidence* of help that underpins security and pleasure. Epicurean friendship is neither transactional nor abstractly altruistic; it is a genuine community of mutual care in which the willingness to give and receive help is part of the fabric of the relationship.

⁂

## VS 40

**Bailey:** *"The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity."*[77]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A clever logical paradox with no practical significance – a philosophical game rather than a serious argument.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is a precise and devastating refutation of hard determinism – the view that all events, including human choices, are necessitated. If the strict determinist is right, then even his own assertion of determinism and the response of anyone who disagrees are both necessitated; neither can be genuinely evaluated as correct or incorrect. The argument matters practically because hard determinism – whether in its Stoic form (fate and providence) or religious form (divine predetermination) – undermines the basis for rational choice and philosophical self-improvement. Epicurus defended the swerve in atomic motion precisely to preserve the real possibility of free choice; this saying shows why that matters for how we reason about our lives.



## VS 41

**Bailey:** *"We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."*[78]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Platonism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is recommending a moderate balance of philosophy with ordinary life – the philosopher does not abandon the world but integrates wisdom into daily routine, as a Stoic practitioner might.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The opening word is the key: *laugh*. Epicurean philosophy is not solemn, burdensome, or heroic in the Stoic sense. The laughter is not incidental decoration on a serious program of philosophical practice – it is the natural expression of a person who has actually understood and is actually living well. Household duties are not obstacles to philosophy to be endured stoically; they are part of the fabric of a pleasant life. The call to "never cease proclaiming" reflects Epicurus' missionary conviction – shared by Diogenes of Oinoanda – that the true philosophy heals and that its healing should be shared.[79] This is a picture of Epicurean community in its daily reality, not a prescription for philosophical heroism.

⁂

## VS 42

**Bailey:** *"The greatest blessing is created and enjoyed at the same moment."* (DeWitt renders this as: *"The same span of time embraces both the beginning and the end of the greatest good."*)[80]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Platonism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A vague celebration of present-moment awareness – Epicurus anticipates Buddhist mindfulness or Stoic focus on the present, counseling us to be fully present in each moment as the secret to happiness.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying makes a precise point about the nature of life's greatest good - pleasure. Unlike idealistic notions of virtue or unlimited desires which are impossible to obtain, pleasure is simultaneously constituted and experienced in all life experiences which are not painful. There is no gap between having pleasure and enjoying it, no preliminary labor that precedes possession. DeWitt's rendering sharpens the point: the complete life of pleasure has no separation between its beginning and its end – it is whole in each experience of pleasure itself. This is the direct refutation of the frameworks – Stoic, Platonic, religious – that defer the complete life to a future achievement, a higher state, or an afterlife. The greatest good is available now, in its own exercise, in the experience of pleasure.

⁂

## VS 43

**Bailey:** *"The love of money, if unjustly gained, is impious, and, if justly, shameful; for it is unseemly to be merely parsimonious even with justice on one's side."*[81]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus condemns wealth accumulation – confirming the ascetic reading that Epicureans should avoid money and material prosperity as corrupting.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is not condemning wealth but condemning *the love of money* – the orientation that treats money as an end rather than a means. Unjust acquisition is impious because it violates the compact of justice (Principal Doctrines 31–33) and generates the permanent anxiety of the wrongdoer.[82] Just but parsimonious accumulation is shameful because it treats money as intrinsically valuable – hoarding what could be used for genuine pleasure, friendship, and the benefit of one's community. This is consistent with VS 67: the Epicurean with means distributes freely and wins the goodwill of neighbors. The target spoken against is the *love* of money, not money itself.

⁂

## VS 44

**Bailey:** *"The wise man when he has accommodated himself to straits knows better how to give than to receive: so great is the treasure of self-sufficiency which he has discovered."*[83]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is praising self-denial and the virtue of giving – a religious or Humanist ethics of generosity that contradicts the "selfish hedonist" caricature.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The point is not that giving is virtuous in itself but that the genuinely content person – who has discovered that the treasure of understanding and self-sufficiency is real – is freed from the anxious need to accumulate. He can give because he has found, through philosophy, that he lacks nothing essential. The generous giving flows from actual philosophical achievement, not from duty or religious virtue. This is one of the strongest pieces of evidence against both the hedonist caricature and the ascetic misreading: the Epicurean who has understood his own sufficiency is neither grasping nor self-denying but genuinely and practically free.

⁂

## VS 45

**Bailey:** *"The study of nature does not make men productive of boasting or bragging nor apt to display that culture which is the object of rivalry with the many, but high-spirited and self-sufficient, taking pride in the good things of their own minds and not of their circumstances."*[84]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Humanism / Stoicism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Natural philosophy in Epicurus is merely instrumental – a tool for eliminating fear – and produces modest, retiring personalities. The Humanist reads "taking pride in the good things of their own minds" as confirming the primacy of intellectual culture; the Stoic reads "self-sufficient" as confirming the Stoic ideal of inner independence.[85]

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying distinguishes Epicurean natural philosophy from the competitive display culture of Sophists, Academics, and the rhetorically ambitious. The Epicurean who has studied nature is *high-spirited* – the Greek term (*megalopsychos* or equivalent) implies genuine pride and strength of character, not the retiring modesty of the ascetic or the detachment of the Stoic sage. The pride is in actual mental goods – understanding, freedom from fear, genuine philosophical achievement – not in the social performance of culture that the many compete to display. This is not self-effacement but real confident joy in genuine possession.

⁂

## VS 46

**Bailey:** *"Our bad habits, like evil men who have long done us great harm, let us utterly drive from us."*[86]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A moral exhortation to self-improvement that sounds like Stoic self-discipline or religious penitence – Epicurus is prescribing the active suppression of vice.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The vivid image of "evil men who have long done us great harm" is not a moral condemnation of habit but a practical recognition of how habits actually operate: as external-seeming forces that have colonized our responses without our fully noticing.[87] The Epicurean response is not Stoic self-discipline (overriding inclination through reason-as-will) or religious repentance (guilt and reform through grace) but a clear-eyed recognition of what these habits are costing in terms of pleasure and peace of mind, followed by active expulsion. The motivation is always pleasure and the removal of harm, never duty or virtue for its own sake.

⁂

## VS 47

**Bailey:** *"I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and entrenched myself against all thy secret attacks. And we will not give ourselves up as captives to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who here vainly cling to it, we will leave life crying aloud in a glorious triumph-song that we have lived well."*[88]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** This is the Stoic sage in Epicurean dress – a man armored against everything outside his will, indifferent to what fortune gives or takes, and finally contemptuous of life itself. Or it is read as world-weariness: the philosopher who has had enough and is glad to go.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The contempt is aimed at a particular way of living, not at life. "Those who here vainly cling to it" are the people who never learned that death is nothing to us, and who spend their years clutching at more time because they have never filled the time they had.[89] The Epicurean has "entrenched" himself in advance by understanding – that the soul does not survive, that no punishment waits, that the limits of desire are easily reached, and that friends and a well-ordered life secure most of what matters. That gives him a reasoned confidence against fortune, not a guarantee, and it is the opposite of Stoic resignation: the Stoic follows fate willingly, while the Epicurean denies that fate rules him at all, since much of life is in our own control. The saying ends not

in grim endurance but in a "glorious triumph-song," and its measure is "that we have lived well."[90] The man who can sing that at the end has had a life full of pleasure, and he knows it.

⁂

## VS 48

**Bailey:** *"We must try to make the end of the journey better than the beginning, as long as we are journeying, but when we come to the end, we must be happy and content."*[91]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** The "journey" is moral self-improvement – progress in virtue, or preparation of the soul for what comes after death. The closing words "happy and content" are read as resignation: accept the end quietly, and be satisfied with whatever you were given.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The journey is a life, and what is to be made better is its pleasantness. The saying asks for effort "as long as we are journeying": more knowledge, closer friendships, better use of what nature offers, and new pleasures both quiet and bold – a good meal with friends, but also travel, building something of one's own, or climbing the mountain one has always looked at.[92] Nothing here counsels settling. At the end, however, there is no further stage and no judgment to prepare for. A life already filled with pleasure is not made fuller by more time, so the man who reaches the end of a well-lived life has no reason for regret, and every reason to be glad of what he has had. "Happy and content" is that gladness, not a surrender.

⁂

## VS 51

**Bailey:** *"You tell me that the stimulus of the flesh makes you too prone to the pleasures of love. Provided that you do not break the laws or good customs and do not distress any of your neighbours or do harm to your body or squander your pittance, you may indulge your inclination as you please."*[93]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is grudgingly permitting sexual activity within tight constraints – another example of his fundamental asceticism and suspicion of bodily pleasure.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying – addressed to a specific individual – is a direct application of the Epicurean analytical framework to a real person's real situation, not a general policy on sexuality. The conditions attached are not moral prohibitions but a practical cost-benefit checklist derived from Principal Doctrine 8: no pleasure is bad in itself, but the means of obtaining pleasures must be evaluated for their consequences.[94] The four conditions (no violation of law or custom, no distress to neighbors, no bodily harm, no squandering of means) are all consequences that would produce greater pain than the pleasure gained. There is no suggestion that sexual love is suspicious or spiritually dangerous; the question is purely whether the specific pursuit in this person's case is worth the cost.

⁂

## VS 52

**Bailey:** *"Friendship goes dancing round the world proclaiming to us all to awake to the praises of a happy life."*[95]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A pretty sentiment about friendship, taken as evidence of Epicurus' warmth and humanity – often quoted in isolation as a reassuring counterweight to the "cold hedonist" caricature without integrating it into the full Epicurean picture.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is not decorative. The image of friendship *dancing* and *proclaiming* ties together three fundamental Epicurean commitments: the conviction that happiness is real and available (VS 33, VS 41), the primacy of friendship as the greatest good wisdom produces (PD 27), and the missionary impulse to spread the true philosophy (VS 29, VS 41).[96] Friendship is not a private comfort for the Epicurean community; it is itself an announcement to the world that the happy life is possible and that people should

wake up to it. The dancing is the joy of the person who has actually found what most people are looking for.

⁂

## VS 53

**Bailey:** *"We must envy no one: for the good do not deserve envy and the bad, the more they prosper, the more they injure themselves."*[97]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A moral counsel against envy on the grounds that envy is a vice – compatible with Stoic or religious condemnation of envy as one of the deadly sins.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurus is not condemning envy as a moral failing but dissolving its psychological basis by accurate analysis. There is no rational reason to envy the good because their goodness is genuinely admirable, not threatening. There is no rational reason to envy the bad because their prosperity increases their actual harm to themselves – they are running faster toward destruction, not toward happiness. This connects directly to PD 17 and VS 7: the unjust and vain prosper only in the superficial sense, while their inner lives deteriorate. Envy dissolves when you see clearly what the envied person's situation actually is.

⁂

## VS 54

**Bailey:** *"We must not pretend to study philosophy, but study it in reality: for it is not the appearance of health that we need, but real health."*[98]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is warning against superficial learning and recommending genuine intellectual engagement – a Humanist or Platonic call to authentic intellectual culture rather than mere social performance.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The medical analogy is the key – and it is Epicurus' own characteristic framing. Philosophy is a medicine for the soul; what is needed is real health, not the appearance of it. This means that the point of philosophical study is not intellectual achievement, social credibility, or cultural formation (the Humanist and Platonic readings) but the actual elimination of the fears and vain desires that make people miserable. A person who studies philosophy but remains frightened of death, enslaved to vain desire, and anxious about divine judgment has the appearance of philosophy without the health it is meant to produce.

⁂

## VS 55

**Bailey:** *"We must heal our misfortunes by the grateful recollection of what has been and by the recognition that it is impossible to make undone what has been done."*[99]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A Stoic-flavored acceptance of the past – what is done cannot be undone, so accept it and move on. Or a religious counsel of gratitude for blessings even in adversity.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The word *heal* is characteristically Epicurean and precisely chosen. The recollection of past pleasures is not passive acceptance or religious gratitude but an active therapeutic practice – using the actual goods of experience already possessed to counterbalance present difficulty. This connects to Principal Doctrine 18's discussion of the mind's role in managing pleasure and pain across time.[100] The recognition that the past cannot be undone is not Stoic fatalism but a practical argument against wasting present energy on regret: the past good is real and permanently possessed; dwelling on its loss rather than its reality is a philosophical error with a practical cure.

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## VS 56

**Bailey:** *The wise man feels no more pain, when being tortured himself than when his friend is tortured.*

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is celebrating the Stoic-style sage's indifference to physical pain – the wise man has so thoroughly mastered his reactions that even torture leaves him essentially unaffected. Or alternatively, it is read as a sentimental expression of empathy, showing that Epicurus was "really" an altruist who valued others above himself.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Neither the Stoic nor the sentimental reading is correct. This saying is about what genuine Epicurean friendship actually produces in a person who has fully achieved it. The wise man's care for his friend has become so real and deep – through long shared life, shared philosophy, and genuine mutual commitment – that the friend's suffering is as present to him as his own. This is not self-abnegating altruism (the religious/Humanist misread) or Stoic indifference to one's own pain (the Stoic misread), but the fruit of the friendship that VS 52 celebrates and PD 27 calls the greatest good. The boundary between self and genuine friend has become, through real intimacy and shared understanding, genuinely permeable. This is the highest expression of what Epicurean friendship is – not an abstract ideal but a lived reality whose depth transforms the person who achieves it.

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## VS 57

**Bailey:** *On occasion a man will die for his friend, for if he betrays his friend, his whole life will be confounded by distrust and completely upset.*

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** The first clause is used to argue that Epicurus endorsed noble self-sacrifice for others – contradicting the "selfish hedonist" carica-

ture and proving he was really an altruist. The second clause is then used against him: it reduces the willingness to die to mere guilt-avoidance, making the apparent generosity of the first clause look like self-interest in disguise.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Both misreadings miss what is actually being said. The willingness to die for a friend is not noble self-abnegation – it is the honest recognition that the person who has genuinely achieved Epicurean friendship understands that betraying it would destroy the very thing that makes his life worth living. The "distrust" that would "confound the whole life" is not an external punishment or a guilty conscience imposed from outside – it is the internal dissolution of the security, confidence, and genuine pleasure that friendship provides and that are the actual foundation of happiness. The person who betrays a friend to save himself has not preserved his life; he has emptied it of what made it worth having. This is entirely consistent with VS 34, VS 39, and PD 27: genuine friendship is not a sentiment layered on top of self-interest but a real good that, once fully achieved, is inseparable from the self that possesses it.

⁂

## VS 58

**Bailey:** *We must free ourselves from the prison of public education and politics.*

**Adulterating Tradition:** Humanism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is being anti-intellectual and anti-civic – retreating from public engagement and formal education, confirming the garden-recluse caricature. The saying is used as proof that Epicureans were disengaged, culturally hostile, and politically irresponsible.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** "Public education" here does not mean literacy, learning, or philosophy – it refers to the competitive rhetorical and cultural formation that trains people into vain desires, status anxiety, and the hunger for popular approval. This is the system VS 45 identifies as producing "boasting and bragging" and rivalry for cultural display, and that VS 29 rejects in favor of truth over praise. "Politics" refers not to any justified civic engagement – which PD 6 and 7 explicitly allow when it produces genuine security – but to the pursuit of political power as an end in itself, which requires precisely the "servility to

mobs or monarchs" condemned in VS 67.[101] The "prison" metaphor is key: these are not mere pastimes to be moderated but institutional frameworks that actively install the mind viruses – the love of fame, the need for approval, the equation of status with happiness – that destroy the capacity for genuine pleasure. Freeing oneself from them is not withdrawal from the world but the removal of the chains that prevent full engagement with what actually matters.

⁂

## VS 59

**Bailey:** *"It is not the stomach that is insatiable, as is generally said, but the false opinion that the stomach needs an unlimited amount to fill it."*[102]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Buddhism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is warning against appetite itself – the body is a greedy beast to be tamed, and the wise man keeps his stomach on short rations. This reading pairs naturally with Plato's picture of the desiring soul as a leaky jar that can never be filled, with the Christian treatment of gluttony as a deadly sin, and with the Buddhist teaching that craving must be extinguished.[103]

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying defends the stomach. The natural desire for food is limited and easily satisfied; what has no limit is a false opinion about it. This is the reverse of Plato's leaky jar, where endless desire is built into human nature: for Epicurus the unlimited comes from mistaken belief, and belief can be corrected. Nothing here condemns enjoying food, or a feast, or any pleasure of the table. The test, as always, is whether a pleasure brings greater pains in its train. The person who thinks he needs ever more of anything – food, wealth, honours – is held by an empty desire, and the cure is not hunger but understanding what nature actually requires and how easily it is supplied.

⁂

## VS 60

**Bailey:** *Every man passes out of life as though he had just been born.*

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A consoling egalitarianism – death is the great leveler, and we all face it with the same helplessness as a newborn. Compatible with Stoic equanimity before death or religious memento mori that humbles the proud.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is not a consolation but a warning, and its sting is directed at a specific kind of failure. No matter how many years a person has lived, if he has spent them accumulating vain goods, deferring genuine pleasure to a future that never arrived, and pursuing the empty ambitions that VS 58 and VS 45 identify as prisons – he arrives at death with nothing genuinely possessed. He is exactly where he was at birth: empty-handed, having never drawn on the actual resources that were always available to him. This connects directly to VS 14's warning that "life is wasted in procrastination," to PD 19 and 20's insistence that the complete life requires no infinite time and is fully achievable within a finite span, and to VS 17's portrait of the old man who has brought genuine goods "into safe harbourage in his grateful recollections."[104] Dying as though just born is not a universal condition to be accepted – it is a failure that Epicurean philosophy specifically exists to prevent.

⁂

## VS 61

**Bailey:** *"Most beautiful too is the sight of those near and dear to us, when our original kinship makes us of one mind; for such sight is a great incitement to this end."*[105]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A sentimental observation about the beauty of family and social bonds – compatible with any warm-hearted philosophy and contributing nothing specifically Epicurean.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The phrase "original kinship makes us of one mind" does philosophical work that the sentimental reading misses entirely.[106] The sight of those dear to us who share genuine philosophical understanding – who have arrived at the same orientation toward life through the same study –

is beautiful in a specific way: it is the visible confirmation of the community that Epicurean philosophy makes possible. This is not generic family warmth but the particular beauty of the Epicurean garden community: people united by shared understanding and genuine friendship who *see* in each other what the philosophy has produced. The "stirring to this end" means that seeing it inspires others toward the same.

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## VS 63

**Bailey:** *"Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is in like case with him who errs through excess."*[107]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Almost entirely ignored, since it cuts against both the ascetic misreading of Epicurus (those who would prefer no limit on simplicity) and the hedonist misreading (those who would prefer no limit on excess). When noticed, it is assimilated to Aristotle's golden mean.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is one of the most important correctives in the entire VS collection for the ascetic misreading. Epicurus is saying explicitly that excessive simplicity – treating self-denial as a virtue, restricting pleasures beyond what nature and prudence require – is as much a failure as excess. The standard is always nature and the real production of pleasure; falling short of what nature actually requires is as much an error as exceeding it. This saying proves conclusively that Epicurean "simple living" is not an ascetic program but a practical calibration whose goal is maximum genuine pleasure, not minimum consumption.

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## VS 66

**Bailey:** *"Let us show our feeling for our lost friends not by lamentation but by meditation."*[108]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Cold philosophical detachment – Epicurus is counseling suppression of grief in the manner of a Stoic who denies that loss is a real evil, or this is taken as evidence of the emotional shallowness of Epicurean friendship.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The word *meditation* (or recollection, depending on the translator) points to VS 55: the active recollection of the genuine pleasures of friendship already possessed and permanently real. This is not suppression of feeling but redirection of it toward what is actually available – the real and indestructible record of the friendship as it was lived – rather than toward lamentation over what is gone. Read with VS 40 of the Principal Doctrines, where Epicureans in community "do not lament the previous departure of a dead friend, as though he were to be pitied," this is not coldness but the fruit of understanding: grief without despair because what was real remains real in memory and understanding.[109]

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## VS 67

**Bailey:** *"A free life cannot acquire many possessions, because this is not easy to do without servility to mobs or monarchs, yet it possesses all things in unfailing abundance; and if by chance it obtains many possessions, it is easy to distribute them so as to win the gratitude of neighbours."*[110]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus is praising poverty and condemning wealth accumulation – another ascetic proof text. Or alternatively, the last clause is isolated to argue Epicurus endorsed charitable redistribution in the Humanist sense.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The key phrase is "servility to mobs or monarchs" – the Epicurean avoids the accumulation of great wealth not because wealth is evil but because the *process* of acquiring it typically requires forms of dependence and compromise that destroy freedom and the security that is the actual foundation of happiness.[111] The free life "possesses all things in unfailing abundance" because it has correctly identified what it actually needs and secured

those things – it is not impoverished but genuinely sufficient.[112] If wealth comes without servility, it is distributed freely, which wins the goodwill of neighbors and thereby enhances the security and pleasure that are the actual goals.

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## VS 68

**Bailey:** *"Nothing is sufficient for him to whom what is sufficient seems little."*[113]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion / Humanism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A moral epigram about greed – Epicurus condemns the insatiable as a moral warning, compatible with any tradition that counsels moderation.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is a diagnostic statement, not a moral condemnation. The person for whom the sufficient seems little is not morally defective but *philosophically confused* – he has not understood what genuine sufficiency is and therefore cannot recognize it when he has it. This is the practical consequence of the mind virus that PD 15 targets: the belief that "enough" is always just out of reach. No amount of additional acquisition will cure this condition because the problem is not insufficiency but misidentification of the standard. The cure is philosophical understanding of nature's actual requirements, not more wealth or more self-discipline.

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## VS 69

**Bailey:** *"The ungrateful greed of the soul makes the creature everlastingly desire varieties of dainty food."*[114]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Platonism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus condemns luxurious eating – another proof that he was essentially an ascetic suspicious of bodily pleasure, or a moralist condemning gluttony.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The word "ungrateful" is the key – it names the failure not as excess but as ingratitude, the inability to recognize and be satisfied by genuine pleasures already possessed. The "greed of the soul" – not of the body – is what drives the longing for endless variety, connecting this directly to PD 29-30's analysis of vain desire as driven by the mind's empty imaginings rather than genuine bodily need. Simple food enjoyed with genuine pleasure is not condemned; the frenetic pursuit of variety driven by a soul that cannot recognize real satisfaction is the problem. VS 33's vision of rivaling Zeus with basic necessities secured is the positive counterpart to this negative diagnosis.

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## VS 70

**Bailey:** *"Let nothing be done in your life, which will cause you fear if it becomes known to your neighbour."*[115]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A conventional moral rule – Epicurus is counseling social respectability and conformity to community standards, as any conventional moralist would.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is not a social conformity rule but a direct application of the Epicurean analysis of injustice in PD 34 and 35. The standard is not what the neighbor will think but what you yourself would *fear* if the neighbor knew – the fear is the signal that the action is one that corrupts your own peace of mind and security. Living openly, without hidden actions whose exposure would cause fear, is the practical condition of the just man's tranquility described in PD 17. This is not external constraint but internal freedom: the person who can act without fear of disclosure has achieved something that no amount of social performance can substitute for.

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## VS 71

**Bailey:** *"Every desire must be confronted with this question: what will happen to me, if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?"*[116]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A Stoic-flavored practice of negative visualization – Epicurus is telling us to imagine the worst case so we can accept it with equanimity, as the Stoics recommend.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The question goes in both directions: both what happens if the desire is satisfied *and* what happens if it is not. This is the practical application of the desire classification in PD 26 and 29: desires that produce significant pain when unmet need to be distinguished from those that dissolve easily. The question about satisfaction – "what will happen to me, if the object of my desire is accomplished" – is equally important and equally non-Stoic: Epicurus is asking us to evaluate whether the satisfaction will actually produce the pleasure expected, not merely whether we can endure the disappointment.[117] This is rational pleasure-management, not preparation for loss.

⁂

## VS 72

**Bailey:** *"There is no profit in securing protection in relation to men, if things above and things beneath the earth and indeed all in the boundless universe remain matters of suspicion."*[118]

**Note:** This saying closely parallels Principal Doctrine 13.[119] See that entry for full analysis. The core point – that social security without philosophical understanding of nature leaves cosmic fear intact – is the same in both.

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## VS 73

**Bailey:** *"The occurrence of certain bodily pains assists us in guarding against others like them."*[120]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Pain has positive value – it teaches us and builds character, confirming religious doctrines of redemptive suffering or Stoic doctrines of hardship as training.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This is a precise naturalistic observation, not an endorsement of pain's value. Certain pains function as signals that alert us to conditions that would produce greater pain if ignored – they are useful as information, not valuable as experiences. This is entirely consistent with Epicurus' view that pain is always an evil (PD 3): the pain that guards against greater pain is instrumentally useful in the way a warning signal is useful, not intrinsically good in the way religious and Stoic frameworks claim suffering to be.[121] The misreading that turns this into an endorsement of character-building through suffering is precisely the confusion Epicurus is not making.

⁂

## VS 74

**Bailey:** *"In a philosophical discussion he who is worsted gains more in proportion as he learns more."*[122]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Humanism / Skepticism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A magnanimous observation about intellectual humility – Epicurus endorses open philosophical debate in the Academic or Humanist tradition of free inquiry, where all positions are open to revision.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The saying is grounded in Epicurus' therapeutic view of philosophy. The person who is "worsted" – whose false beliefs are refuted – gains *more* than the one whose true beliefs survive the test, precisely because he has had something harmful removed. This is not Academic open-

endedness (where no conclusion is final) or Humanist celebration of debate for its own sake, but a statement about the medical function of philosophical argument: identifying and removing false beliefs that cause harm. The gain is real philosophical health, not merely intellectual broadening.

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## VS 75

**Bailey:** *"Ungrateful towards the blessings of the past is the saying, 'Wait till the end of a long life.'"*[123]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Platonism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A warning against procrastination or against postponing enjoyment – motivational advice compatible with any philosophy that values carpe diem.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The target is specifically the framework that evaluates a life only by its final condition – that happiness must be assessed at the end rather than possessed throughout. This is a direct refutation of the Aristotelian and Stoic view that we cannot call a person happy until his life is complete, and of the religious view that the final judgment determines the ultimate value of a life. For Epicurus, the blessings of the past are real and possessed; to declare them worthless because the end has not yet come – or because the end was bad – is a philosophical error with real costs. A life is composed of its pleasures as they are lived; the end does not retroactively determine their value.

⁂

## VS 76

**Bailey:** *"You are in your old age just such as I urge you to be, and you have seen the difference between studying philosophy for oneself and proclaiming it to Greece at large: I rejoice with you."*[124]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Humanism / Stoicism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus counsels philosophy as a private consolation, to be practised quietly and never spread – confirming the picture of the

Epicurean as a recluse who withdraws from the world and keeps his views to himself.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The contrast is between philosophy studied for the sake of one's own life and philosophy performed for public applause. It is the same distinction VS 29 draws in preferring true answers "rather than to conform to popular opinions and so win the praise freely scattered by the mob," and that VS 45 draws against the "culture which is the object of rivalry with the many."[125] It is not a ban on teaching. Epicurus founded schools, wrote some three hundred books (DL X.26), and kept up a wide correspondence to keep his friends and students in the truth.[126] What he praises here is a friend who has made philosophy his own way of living, so that in old age he is "just such as I urge you to be."[127] The last words are the point: "I rejoice with you." This is the shared joy of friends who have lived the philosophy, and it is one of the clearest pictures in the collection of old age as a time of fulfilment rather than decline.

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## VS 77

**Bailey:** *"The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom."*[128]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Epicurus endorses Stoic self-sufficiency – the inner independence of the sage who is free from all external determination. Or religious self-sufficiency as freedom from worldly attachment.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** Epicurean self-sufficiency is not the Stoic sage's independence from all externals – it is the practical condition of having identified and secured what nature actually requires, which is genuinely achievable and genuinely liberating. The "freedom" produced is concrete: freedom from servility to mobs and monarchs (VS 67), freedom from the frenetic pursuit of vain desires (PD 15), freedom from the permanent anxiety of the person who always needs more.[129] This is not inner independence from external reality but an accurate relationship with external reality that produces real, practical freedom in daily life.

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## VS 78

**Bailey:** *"The noble soul occupies itself with wisdom and friendship: of these the one is a mortal good, the other immortal."*[130]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Platonism / Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** Wisdom is the "immortal good" because it partakes of the eternal – confirming Platonic dualism in which the soul through reason participates in the immortal. Or friendship is the "immortal good" because love transcends death in a quasi-religious sense.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The identification of which is mortal and which immortal is the counterintuitive reversal that requires careful reading. Wisdom is the *mortal* good – it belongs to a particular person living a particular finite life and ends with that life. Friendship is the *immortal* good – not because friends survive death, but because genuine friendship, understood and practiced rightly, is figuratively a god-like experience. Further, friendship is what continues through communities across generations and what gives Epicurean philosophy its capacity to persist and spread. Epicurus founded not only a philosophy but a community; the friendship that animates it is what has proved enduring. The Platonic reading gets the assignment exactly backwards.

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## VS 79

**Bailey:** *"The man who is serene causes no disturbance to himself or to another."*[131]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Buddhism

**Common Misinterpretation:** Serenity (*ataraxia*) is the Epicurean goal – this confirms that Epicurus was fundamentally a philosopher of tranquility and detachment, comparable to the Stoic sage or Buddhist practitioner.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** This saying describes a *consequence* of living well, not the goal of Epicurean life. The man who has achieved genuine pleasure and security – through understanding, friendship, and accurate management of

desire – is naturally serene because he has no unresolved fears or vain desires driving him to disturb himself or others. Serenity is the outward expression of a life working as it should, not the aim one pursues directly. Pursuing tranquility as the goal – the Stoic and Buddhist misreading of Epicurus – produces a different and distorted program. The goal is *pleasure*; a serene outlook is what pleasure, correctly understood and achieved, looks like in practice.

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## VS 80

**Bailey:** *"The first measure of security is to watch over one's youth and to guard against what makes havoc of all by means of pestering desires."*[132]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Stoicism / Supernatural Religion

**Common Misinterpretation:** A conventional moral warning about protecting the young from temptation – compatible with religious guidance on guarding youth against vice or Stoic counsel on building character early.

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** "Pestering desires" – vain desires driven by idle imagination rather than genuine need – are identified as the primary threat to security from early life. The reasoning is naturalistic: the philosophical errors that make people miserable are most easily installed in youth, when the mind is most susceptible to the cultural transmission of false values (the love of fame, the fear of divine punishment, the belief that "enough" is always out of reach). Epicurean education is not moral formation in the Stoic or religious sense but philosophical inoculation against the mind viruses that destroy happiness. The earliest line of defense is philosophical understanding, not willpower or virtue training.

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## VS 81

**Bailey:** *"The disturbance of the soul cannot be ended nor true joy created either by the possession of the greatest wealth or by honour and respect in the eyes of the mob or by anything else that is associated with causes of unlimited desire."*[133]

**Adulterating Tradition:** Supernatural Religion / Humanism / Stoicism / Platonism

**Common Misinterpretation:** A renunciation of worldly goods compatible with religious otherworldliness or Stoic indifference to externals – Epicurus is confirming that material and social success cannot produce happiness, so we must look beyond them (to God, to virtue, to the soul's inner life).

**Correct Epicurean Interpretation:** The closing saying of the collection makes the Epicurean diagnosis complete and its target explicit: it is not wealth and honor as such that are condemned but wealth and honor *as causes of unlimited desire* – the category of VS 69's "ungrateful greed" and PD 15's "wealth demanded by idle imaginings." Where wealth and honor are obtained without the engine of vain desire driving them – as in VS 67's free man who distributes wealth freely – they are not condemned. What the soul requires is the removal of the unlimited desires that make no acquisition sufficient. That removal is the work of natural philosophy, of accurate understanding of what nature actually requires – and it cannot be purchased, awarded, or inherited. It must be understood.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Rededication: Why We Continue the Work of Recovering Classical Epicurean Philosophy

Epicurus had nothing but contempt for people who claimed to read the future in the flight of birds, the smoking entrails of a sacrificed animal, or the supposed anger of a god muttering through a thunderclap. He built an entire branch of his physics around explaining comets, eclipses, and lightning in purely natural terms, for the specific purpose of making sure no one would ever again lose sleep over a false omen. So what follows is not an oracle. It is a prediction of an entirely different kind – the kind any person is entitled to make after looking long enough at a pattern in the historical record, and after weighing plain, gatherable evidence. Here is my prediction:

The twentieth century, and the first third of the twenty-first, will eventually be remembered as a crisis of confidence more severe than anything the ancient world endured. And one of this crisis' most damning illustrations is the way modern intelligentsia - and the culture following its lead - has treated the teachings of Epicurus.

The ancient world argued fiercely about whether pleasure or virtue was the highest good, whether the gods intervened in human affairs, whether the senses could be trusted, whether anything could be known at all. It argued, but never totally lost its nerve until it was displaced - largely by force - by Judeo-Christianity. Stoics, Epicureans, Skeptics, and Platonists all fought for their own views of the best life, confident that their arguments mattered. The last century, by contrast, both in the halls of academia and in popular writing, looked directly at a philosopher who held that pleasure is "the beginning and the end of a happy life," and concluded by projecting their own impotence that surely Epicurus

meant something else.[1] This "consensus of the wise" (a term borrowed from Nietzsche) concluded that the wise man's highest achievement was to want less, feel less, and approach a state of stillness barely worth distinguishing from death. No Stoic or Platonist or Aristotelian ever needed his own philosophy explained to him by an opponent. Only the shade of Epicurus, the greatest ancient defender of THIS world and the pleasures that are possible in it, has had to endure modern scholars stand over his own words and pronounce, in effect, that he did not really mean what he plainly said. That did not happen as a result of translation issues of loss of texts, though both contributed. This total rewrite occurred becayse the rewriters had themselves lost the courage to recognize an argument for pleasure when it was staring them in the face.

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## How the Ancients Understood Epicurus

The ancient evidence, friendly and hostile alike, is clear and unambiguous. Epicureanism was one of the most influential philosophical movements in the entire Mediterranean world for over five hundred years, and it did not achieve that reach by promising its followers a life of numbness.

Neither Epicurus nor his followers were quiet eccentrics. Philonides of Laodicea served as a royal adviser and converted a Seleucid king to the philosophy. Titus Pomponius Atticus, one of the wealthiest and best-connected men in Rome, studied under an Epicurean teacher and practiced what has been called "vigilant neutrality" – a shrewd, actively managed navigation of friendship and security across a civil war, not a withdrawal from it, and he lived into his eighties doing it. Cineas of Thessaly, chief diplomatic agent to King Pyrrhus, used Epicurean argument to advise his own king against overreaching ambition in a dialogue preserved by Plutarch. Gaius Cassius Longinus, who led the revolt against Julius Caesar, corresponded with Cicero as an avowed Epicurean, quoting Epicurus's own doctrines in Greek and accusing Cicero of a deficient and biased understanding of the philosophy he was attacking. Torquatus and Velleius, the Epicurean spokesmen Cicero chose for his own dialogues, were Roman generals and statesmen of the first rank. Cicero's choice of them, intended to make Epicureanism look respectable enough to be worth refuting, backfires as evidence every

time a modern reader imagines Epicureans as reclusive. An empress, Pompeia Plotina, wrote to the Emperor Hadrian in her own hand: "How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord."[2] None of this is the profile of a philosophy whose highest good was to feel as little as possible.

Nor was the school withdrawn from the city that housed it. Epicurus loved Athens with what Diogenes Laertius calls an "indescribable" devotion. He observed the city's religious festivals, cultivated friendships with sitting politicians, and deposited his own writings in the Metroon, Athens's official state archive – the only private philosophical works known to have been treated that way. His Garden itself stood directly on the Dromos, the city's busiest ceremonial road, on the very route between its main gate and Plato's own Academy; his separate house in Melite was more centrally located than either the Academy or the Lyceum, and valuable enough that a Roman politician sought a formal government decree to build anew on what was left of it two and a half centuries later. Over the gate of the Garden itself hung a sign, preserved for us by Seneca, addressed to any passing stranger: *"Hospes hic bene manebis, hic summum bonum voluptas est"* – "Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure."[3] That is not the signage of a school selling stillness, withdrawal, or resignation.

Even hostile testimony confirms the same judgment. Cicero, arguing against Epicurus with every rhetorical weapon at his disposal, described the life Epicureans actually claimed to want as one "crammed full of pleasures" – *plena et conferta voluptatibus* – not minimal, not ascetic, but *crammed*.[4] Epictetus, no friend to the school, admits in the same breath that he criticizes Epicureans that they married, raised children, held civic office, and served as priests and public officials, exactly like everyone else. And when Epicurus and his own students went looking for targets, they did not shrink back from the fight – they labeled their opponents with inflammatory names. Diogenes Laertius preserves their list: Nausiphanes "the Mollusk," Plato "the Golden" and his followers "Flatterers of Dionysus," Aristotle "the Debauchee," Pyrrho "the Uneducated Fool."[5] A philosophy that spends its energy coining and publishing insults for its rivals is not a philosophy of quiet detachment.

The single most useful ancient witness, though, is the one with nothing at all riding on the outcome of the dispute on how to view Epicurus. Aulus Gellius, a

Roman writer of the second century AD, cites Epicurus's own formula – "the utmost height of pleasure is the removal of all that pains" – purely as a grammatical illustration, in the middle of an entirely unrelated dispute about a word Virgil had used.[6] Gellius places that sentence in the same logical category as calling a monstrous king "unpraised" or a blameless man "faultless": total negation of a bad thing states the maximum of its opposite, not some hollowed-out lesser condition. This is the testimony of a witness who had no stake whatsoever in Epicurean ethics. He was simply commenting on a well-known statement and interpreting it the way any literate person of his century would have read it, and his testimony was that it plainly meant *pleasure at its highest possible degree* – not tranquility, not numbness, nothing other than ordinary mental and bodily pleasure.

None of this is compatible with the idea that Epicurus's best life resembled that of a corpse. People do not reorganize their lives, spend their fortunes, and stake their political reputations on a doctrine of intentional numbness. A "best life indistinguishable from a corpse" would have been laughed out of any room in Athens or Rome. Just like the Epicureans themselves, the ancient world was not shy about mockery – it aimed plenty of that mockery at Epicurus over other points, and never once accusing him of asceticism, because friend and enemy alike understood exactly what he was recommending.

## The Frankenstein Of The Tranquilist Epicurus

Despite the evidence above and much more that could be added, starting in the early twentieth century a stream of commentators have done their best to extract pleasure from the heart of Epicurean philosophy and replace it with something very different.

In 1960, Philip Merlan concluded that "the philosophy of Epicurus is not a philosophy of pleasure; it is a philosophy of joy," deliberately chosing "joy" as an allegedly better translation of pleasure.[7] In 1972, J. M. Rist stated a similar substitution as settled fact: "It is certain that for Epicurus the greatest pleasure is a complete absence of pain."[8] Phillip Mitsis, at Cornell in 1988, found Epicurus's identification of happiness with the absence of pain "caught in a dilemma," concluding that this reading makes the Epicurean good the "*summum bonum* of a

corpse." A.A. Long and David Sedley's *The Hellenistic Philosophers* – one of the most widely assigned reference works in the field – stated in 1987 that "as long as pain is absent we have static pleasure," with no explanation of how this consitutes a felt, active content.[9] Jeffrey Purinton, in 1993, argued that katastematic pleasure is superior to ordinary pleasure precisely *because* it is non-sensory – "the flesh does not report that this painless state is good."[10] Tim O'Keefe has proposed outright that "tranquillist" is a more accurate label for Epicurus than "hedonist." Wikipedia's own "Epicureanism" article states that the Epicurean goal is *aponia* and *ataraxia*, footnoted directly to O'Keefe.

This position dominates academia from Princeton to Cambridge to Oxford to Cornell, through the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and through numerous internet commentaries. By now a full century of some of the world's most credentialed philosophers have looked at Epicurus's statement that pleasure is "the beginning and end of the blessed life" and confidently reported back that the man meant something closer to its negation.[11]

This did not happen by accident. Whenever a writer desires to reconcile Epicurus with a religious or ascetic audience, tranquility is promoted from a description of how pleasure can be experienced into a rival, *superior* category standing above it. This motivation has a long pedigree.

Lorenzo Valla, writing in 1431, has a Christian judge in his dialogue subordinate earthly pleasure to heavenly pleasure – "one pleasure now on earth, the other hereafter in the heavens... we cannot enjoy both of them."[12] Pierre Gassendi, in 1647, pledged in his own dedicatory epistle to "bend all my strength against Epicurus" wherever his philosophy conflicted with the Catholic faith, and it is Gassendi who appears to coin the phrase "*veram germanamque voluptatem*" – "true and genuine pleasure" – the likely historical origin of exactly the "genuine versus lesser pleasure" distinction that we hear so often today, despite the fact that pleasure and pain are feelings, and feelings do not come in "genuine" and counterfeit varieties any more than the five senses do. François Bernier popularized Gassendi's safely tranquil Epicurus in 1699, and the tranquilizing habit these two men needed for theological reasons in the seventeenth century has perpetuated itself through humanist influences even by scholars with no theological

project of their own. What began as an apologetic necessity has been inherited by secular but humanist scholarship.

## Signs of a Thaw

Few trends no matter how dark go on forever, and since at least 1982, a genuine, if still incomplete, countercurrent has been building. , and it deserves to be named as clearly as the tradition it is answering. Although few scholars today acknowledge his influence, it is also worth noting before referencing these more modern scholars that the work of Norman DeWitt predated these by many years, and DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy" remains today the straightest course to the best understanding of Epicurus without the tranquilist corruption that is the target of this article.

In 1982, J.C.B. Gosling and C.C.W. Taylor published *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford, 1982), and in that work argued systematically that what had come to be seen as the traditional tranquilist reading generates problems with no good answers. Gosling and Taylor traced to Cicero the argument that Epicurus' true highest good was "non-sensory, reflection-only," and thereby rejected that argument more than a decade before Purinton revived it. Boris Nikolsky, in 2001, argued that the focus of the entire framework of elevating "katastematic" pleasure over "kinetic" pleasure was an artifact of a later classification scheme, not implied or justified by Diogenes Laertius' mention of the fact that Epicurus embraced both types of pleasure. David Sedley has consistently treated kinetic and katastematic pleasure as jointly necessary aspects of one complete life, not as a hierarchy. Kelly Arenson, in *Health and Hedonism in Plato and Epicurus* (Bloomsbury, 2019), names the stakes bluntly – "How would Epicureans dodge the charge that their best life resembles the state of a corpse?" – and answers that there was and is no needto, because the reading that produces the charge is false. [13] Catherine Wilson's *How to Be an Epicurean* (2019) states without qualification that pleasure, "including pleasure in food and drink," was both the main motive of action and the supreme good, and frames her project explicitly as "defending the authentic Epicurus."[14] Emily Austin's *Living for Pleasure* (Oxford, 2022) declines to relitigate the dispute for a general audience but plants her flag in a footnote, aligning with Gosling, Taylor, and Arenson. Even Julia Annas, writing as early as 1987, insisted that "ataraxia is not an alternative end but a spe-

cification of the kind of pleasure that can be our final end" and that "normal activity can be energetic and varied."[15]

As welcome as are these corrections, they remain a minority position, still fighting for space against a much larger, much older, much more institutionally entrenched consensus.

## Why EpicureanFriends Exists

EpicureanFriends exists because the attempts to excise pleasure from the heart of Epicurus are not isolated slips – they are part of a much larger and much older pattern in which Epicurus' rivals work to read Epicurus as their friend rather than their enemy.

That is exactly what EpicureanFriends' founding statement, "Not NeoEpicurean, But Epicurean," is built to do. Its central point states the correction directly: not "absence of pain" offered as a full statement of the goal on its own, but "the Feelings are two, pleasure and pain" and "Pleasure is the beginning and the end of a happy life."[16] Its other points perform the same corrective action against the other traditions that have tried to make the same substitution: not "flourishing" or "self-actualization," but happiness grounded in the actual feeling of pleasure; not virtue pursued for its own sake, but virtue as the instrument that secures pleasure; not supernatural gods or a life after death, but confidence in a wholly material universe, in which those "for whom wisdom is possible... may truly live as gods" while still alive; not short-term indulgence at the cost of greater pain later, but "continuous pleasures"; not hard determinism, but a universe in which "some things happen of necessity, some by chance, and others through our own choice."

Each of the traditions this project treats as adversarial rather than complementary gets something specific and identifiable wrong, and the differences are not subtle. Stoicism treats pleasure as, at best, a matter of indifference and at worst a contamination, and asks its adherents to master or silence the passions; Epicurus makes pleasure the good itself and expects the wise man to feel more deeply, not less – Diogenes Laertius records directly that the Epicurean sage "will be more susceptible of emotion than other men: that will be no hindrance to his wisdom."[17] Platonism posits an ideal realm of Forms standing behind ordinary ex-

perience and treats the senses as a source of mere opinion to be escaped; Epicurus held that no such realm exists, that the soul is as material and mortal as the body, and that the senses are the foundation, not the enemy, of all genuine knowledge. Buddhism locates the root of suffering in craving itself and aims at the extinguishing of desire; Epicurus never once recommended eliminating desire, only sorting it correctly – distinguishing the natural and necessary from the empty and unlimited – so that the desires worth keeping could be pursued and enjoyed with confidence rather than dissolved. Humanism, in its most common modern form, substitutes rational self-restraint or service to others for pleasure as the primary good, typically without acknowledging how much of that substitution it has quietly inherited from the Stoic and Christian traditions it otherwise claims to have moved past. Academic Skepticism and Pyrrhonism both claim that no knowledge is possible, or that judgment itself should be suspended; Epicurus regarded that position with open contempt, holding that the senses, the anticipations built from repeated experience, and the feelings of pleasure and pain give any honest observer everything needed to know the world and act on that knowledge with confidence.

None of this is offered in a spirit of splitting the difference. Epicurus was not a conciliatory eclectic, and neither is this project. The tone of Epicurean philosophy toward the dominant traditions of its own era was frankly adversarial, and it remains adversarial here on purpose: state the error plainly, name the tradition responsible for it, and refute it directly, rather than opening by praising a distorting reading as "thoughtful" before disagreeing with it. That adversarial posture is not bad manners. It is the same posture the ancient Epicureans themselves took toward Nausiphanes, Plato, Aristotle, and Pyrrho, and it is the posture the historical record shows actually won Epicureanism five centuries of devoted, active, well-documented followers – not the posture of a school hedging its claims to make them more comfortable for its critics.

Where this continues to go is exactly where it has been going since the project began: doctrine by doctrine, citation by citation, building an ever more complete and ever more precisely sourced record of what Epicurus actually said, what the ancient world actually understood him to mean, and where the modern academic consensus has drifted from both. That means continuing to expand the primary-source citation record, continuing to publish corrective analysis of the

specific traditions and specific scholars responsible for particular distortions, and continuing to build a living community of people – not a hierarchy of credentialed experts, but friends in the fullest Epicurean sense of that word – who study this philosophy together and, increasingly, live by it.

## A Rededication

None of this correction is complicated to restate once the substitutions are cleared away. Pleasure is the beginning and the end of a happy life, and the standard by which every other good is judged.[18] The absence of pain is not a hedge, a lesser cousin, or a separate category standing above pleasure – it names pleasure at its highest possible degree, "not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible," in the words Cicero's own Epicurean spokesman would not retract under repeated hostile cross-examination.[19] Virtue is real and necessary, but only as the instrument that secures a pleasant life, never as an end pursued for its own sake. Death is nothing to us, since where we are, death is not, and where death is, we no longer are. The universe is bodies and void, generated and sustained by nothing but nature, with no divine will standing behind it and no fate governing our choices beyond what necessity, chance, and our own agency actually determine. The gods, if they exist, trouble no one and are troubled by nothing, and are worth contemplating only as a model of the blessed life available to us, not as powers to fear. Friendship is the greatest instrument wisdom provides toward a life of security and pleasure, not an abstraction to be theorized about from a distance. And Epicurus's own death is the proof that all of this was meant in earnest: dying in severe pain from kidney disease, he wrote to Idomeneus that the day was nonetheless "truly happy," because the memory of their conversations together outweighed the pain in his body. A man who could say that on his deathbed was not a man whose highest aspiration was to feel as little as possible.

If the argument traced in this article is right, then the confident, century-long insistence that Epicurus meant something close to the opposite of his own words says a great deal more about the crisis of confidence that produced it than it says about the philosopher himself. Correcting that reading, one doctrine and one citation at a time, is the work EpicureanFriends was founded to do, and it is unfinished. If you have read this far and find yourself in agreement – that pleasure, not its absence, was always the point; that the ancient evidence supports an act-

ive and vivid life rather than a numbed one; that Epicurus deserves to be read in his own words rather than through the assumptions of traditions that found him inconvenient – then the invitation is a simple one. Come study the texts with us, bring your own reading and your own citations to the table, and help us finish the work of rediscovering Classical Epicurean philosophy.

→ *Notes for this article*

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# Notes

*The notes are listed by article, in the order in which the articles appear.*

## Why This Matters: The EpicurusToday Perspective on Classical Epicurean Philosophy

1. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.122, trans. Cyril Bailey, in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
2. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 14, in Cyril Bailey, trans., *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
3. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* III.1053, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).
4. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.8, trans. R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, vol. II (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925).
5. David Sedley, "The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius," *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997): 41–53.
6. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 41.
7. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 41.
8. Norman W. DeWitt, "Organization and Procedure in Epicurean Groups," *Classical Philology* 31, no. 3 (1936): 205–211, p. 211.

## Epicurus In The Modern World

For further reading: Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus; Letter to Herodotus; Principal Doctrines; Vatican Sayings (in Diogenes Laertius, Book Ten); Lucretius, De Rerum Natura; Nietzsche, The Gay Science; Twilight of the Idols; The Antichrist; Javier Aoiz and Marcelo Boeri, Theory and Practice in Epicurean Political Philosophy (Bloomsbury, 2023). For the Epicurean community: EpicureanFriends.com and EpicurusToday.com.

1. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 33, in Cyril Bailey, trans., *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
2. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.125, trans. Cyril Bailey, in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
3. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 29.

## Don't Fear, Don't Worry, Don't Bother: Why Using the Tetrapharmakon as a Summary of Epicurus Gets Everything Wrong

**Suggested Further Reading** For the primary Epicurean texts: the Letter to Menoeceus, the Principal Doctrines, and the Vatican Sayings are all available at EpicurusToday.com and EpicureanFriends.com. For the full context of what the four doctrines actually argue, see the relevant entries in the Topical Outline with Key Quotations at EpicurusToday.com (sections C-2 through C-4 for the ethics, A-10 for the theology, A-13 for the treatment of death).

For the historical background on the Tetrapharmakon text: the most direct analysis of the Herculaneum papyrus and the scholarly questions surrounding the text is available through

the Oxford University Faculty of Classics Papyrological Imaging Project. Pamela Gordon's *Epicurus in Lycia* (University of Michigan Press, 1996) contains careful scholarship on the attributions of the term. The EpicureanFriends.com forum thread "Diving Deep Into The History of the Tetrapharmakon / Tetrapharmakos" collects primary sources, scholarly references, and extended analysis.

For the full argument about why this matters for how Epicurean philosophy is understood and practiced, see the other articles at EpicurusToday.com, particularly those on pleasure as the guide of life, the Epicurean goal of happiness rather than ataraxia, and the emergence of happiness from the well-lived life.

1. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.24, trans. Cyril Bailey, in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
2. Elisabetta Martelli, review of *Filodemo, Agli amici di scuola (PHerc. 1005)*, ed. Anna Angeli, *Aegyptus* 69, no. 1/2 (1989): 291–292.
3. Philodemus, *On Methods of Inference*, ed. and trans. Phillip Howard De Lacy and Estelle Allen De Lacy, rev. ed. (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1978).
4. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 01, in Cyril Bailey, trans., *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
5. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 1.
6. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 02.
7. Seneca, *Moral Letters* 26.8, trans. Richard M. Gummere, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917–1925).
8. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 14, in Cyril Bailey, trans., *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
9. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 03.
10. Hermann Usener, *Epicurea* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1887), fr. 580, trans. Erik Anderson (Epicurus.info, 2005).
11. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in Diogenes Laertius X.135.
12. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 04.
13. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 4.
14. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in Diogenes Laertius X.128.

## About the Content of EpicurusToday.com

1. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 14, in Cyril Bailey, trans., *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).

## Jefferson's Epicurus: How America's Philosopher-President Embodied the Fifteen Core Doctrines

Primary Jeffersonian sources cited include the letter to William Short (October 31, 1819), the Syllabus of the Doctrines of Epicurus (1819), the letter to John Adams (August 15, 1820), the

letter to John Adams (July 5, 1814), the letter to Charles Thomson (January 9, 1816), the letter to Peter Carr (August 10, 1787), the letter to Thomas Cooper (December 11, 1823), the letter to Justice William Johnson (June 12, 1823), and the letter to Maria Cosway (October 12, 1786).

1. Thomas Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
2. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
3. Jefferson, letter to Charles Thomson, January 9, 1816.
4. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
5. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
6. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
7. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
8. Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787.
9. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
10. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
11. Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787.
12. William (Lord Kelvin) Thomson, "On the Ultramundane Corpuscles of Le Sage," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* 7 (1872): 577–589.
13. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
14. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 1, 1816.
15. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
16. Jefferson, letter to Justice William Johnson 12 June 1823.
17. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
18. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
19. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
20. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, July 5, 1814.
21. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819.
22. Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787.
23. Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787.
24. Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787.
25. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, July 5, 1814.
26. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
27. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
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30. Jefferson, letter to William Short, October 31, 1819, enclosing his Syllabus of the Doctrines of Epicurus.
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34. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
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36. Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787.
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38. Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820.
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## The Continuing Vitality of Epicurean Physics

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2. Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles*, in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.104, trans. Cyril Bailey, in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
3. Diogenes Laertius X.2.
4. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius X.37, X.87.
5. Cicero, *On Ends* I.30.
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8. A. A. Long, "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism," *Phronesis* 22 (1977): 63–88.
9. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.38, trans. R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, vol. II (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925).
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11. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4A (Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 38).
12. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius X.56–59.
13. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius X.56–59.
14. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius X.41–42.
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24. A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall, eds., *Unpublished Scientific Papers of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 313.
25. T. H. M. Gellar-Goad, "Lucretius on the Size of the Sun," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Lucretius* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
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27. William (Lord Kelvin) Thomson, "On the Ultramundane Corpuscles of Le Sage," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* 7 (1872): 577–589, p. 577.
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## Let All Who Would Free Themselves From the False Claims Of The Geometers Enter Here

1. Seneca, *Moral Letters* 21.10, trans. Richard M. Gummere, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917–1925).
2. Hermann Usener, *Epicurea* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1887), fr. 181, trans. Erik Anderson (Epicurus.info, 2005).
3. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.38, trans. Cyril Bailey, in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
4. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius X.56.
5. David Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," *Isis* 70, no. 3 (1979): 407.
6. Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," 418.

## There Is No True World - Truth And Reality Does Not Require Being Eternally The Same

1. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.129, trans. Cyril Bailey, in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
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3. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "'Reason' in Philosophy" §2, in *Portable Nietzsche*.

## Epicurus Against Aristotle On Atomism

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3. David Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," *Isis* 70, no. 3 (1979): 401.
4. Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," 396.
5. Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," 399–400.
6. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* X.56, trans. Cyril Bailey, in Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
7. Furley, *Two Studies*, p. 115.
8. Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," 407.
9. Konstan, "Problems in Epicurean Physics," 396.
10. Furley, *Two Studies*, p. 115.
11. Furley, *Two Studies*, p. 115.

## Greater Than The Sum Of Its Parts: Emergence In Epicurean Philosophy

Further reading: For Sedley's argument see "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism" in* Synzetesis: Studi sull' epicureismo greco e romano *(1983). For the primary Epicurean texts see the Letter to Herodotus and Letter to Menoeceus in Diogenes Laertius Book X, and Lucretius's* De Rerum Natura *Books I–III for the most concentrated treatment of the relevant passages. For Jefferson's statement of the materialist position see his letter to John Adams dated August 15, 1820, available through the Founders Online archive at the National Archives.

1. Hermann Usener, *Epicurea* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1887), fr. 315, trans. Erik Anderson (Epicurus.info, 2005).
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3. Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

## Epicurean Responses To The Intelligent Design Argument

It draws on the primary Epicurean texts in the Bailey translations, on Cicero's dialogues on the nature of the gods as the primary ancient debate document, on David Sedley's modern scholarly analysis of ancient creationism and its critics, and on the systematic Epicurean philosophical framework developed in the companion articles on this site. The first edition of this work was produced on April 28, 2026. Revisions are ongoing.

1. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I.4, in *The Works of Xenophon*, trans. H. G. Dakyns, vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1897).
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## The "Epicurean Paradox" Is Not Epicurean - An Excellent Article By Eikadistes

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5. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* II.1090, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).
6. Sextus, *Outlines* III.11.

## Epicurean Canonics - The World We Experience Is the Only Real World

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## Two Roads But One Dead End - Why the Epicurean Approach to Knowledge Is Superior to the Stoic

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## Two Names, One Reality - Why "Absence of Pain" and "Pleasure" Are Interchangeable Terms in Epicurean Philosophy - and Why This Changes Everything

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## In Troubled Times, Why Young People Should Turn To Epicurus Rather Than To The Pope

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## Two Epicurean Generals Whose Names Will Echo Longer Than Caesar - Torquatus And Velleius, Defenders of Epicurus

References and Further Reading:**

Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (On Ends), Books I and II – Torquatus's defense of Epicurean ethics and Cicero's response. Side-by-side translation at EpicureanFriends.com.

Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods), Book I – Velleius's defense of Epicurean theology against all rival views. Side-by-side translation at EpicureanFriends.com.

Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares* (Letters to Friends), Book XV, especially letters 15.16 (Cicero to Cassius on Epicureanism) and 15.19 (Cassius to Cicero in reply). Available with commentary at EpicureanFriends.com.

Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* – the primary source for Epicurean ethics, including the doctrine of pleasure and the nature of the goal of life.

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) – the fullest surviving exposition of Epicurean physics, including the nature of the gods and the *intermundia*.

For the Classical Epicurean position on pleasure, pain, and the meaning of "absence of pain," see the resources at EpicurusToday.com, particularly "Two Names, One Reality: Why 'Absence of Pain' and 'Pleasure' Are Interchangeable Terms in Epicurean Philosophy."

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## Epicurus And The Jews - Conflict And Opposition

Primary sources discussed include the Talmudic Mishnah (tractate Sanhedrin); Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 20 (Smith translation); Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals and The Antichrist; the inscriptions recording Plotina's correspondence with Hadrian on the Epicurean school succession (IG II² 1099, SEG 55.250); Norman DeWitt, St. Paul and Epicurus; Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Torah; and Epicurus, Principal Doctrines.

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## Commentary On The Doctrines of Epicurus

All Bailey translations are from Cyril Bailey, "Epicurus: The Extant Remains" (Oxford, 1926). The interpretations on this page reflect the editorial perspective of Cassius Amicus at EpicurusToday.com, with particular attention to refuting adulterations introduced through Stoicism, Academic Skepticism, Platonism, Supernatural Religion, and Humanism. For the broader context of those misreadings, see the additional article Mind Viruses and other materials on the EpicurusToday.com website.*

While the following are in no way responsible for the content or opinions stated on this page, in composing this commentary special mention attention has been paid to the work of David Sedley (numerous articles and books), Gosling & Taylor (especially *"The Greeks On Pleasure"*), and Norman DeWitt (*"Epicurus and His Philosophy"*). For a more contemporary treatment of Epicurean Ethical issues, also see Emily Austin's "*Living For Pleasure.*"

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## Rededication: Why We Continue the Work of Recovering Classical Epicurean Philosophy

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