
ἄρχαί

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL
THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

ARTICLE

Prudence and the Pleasant Life in Epicureanism

Clifford M. Roberts ⁱ

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7195-8244>

cliffordroberts@uvic.ca

ⁱ University of Victoria – Victoria – Canada

ROBERTS, C. M. (2026). Prudence and the Pleasant Life in Epicureanism. *Archai* 36, e03607.

Abstract: In the following paper, I examine the Epicurean conception of the relation between the virtue of prudence and the pleasant life by means of a discussion of two Epicurean theses, which I label “Inseparability” and “Causality.” Inseparability asserts that prudence is inseparable from the pleasant life, while Causality asserts that prudence is a cause of the pleasant life. I discuss each of these theses in turn as well as their combination, namely, the thesis, which

I label “Causal Inseparability,” that prudence is a necessary and sufficient cause of the pleasant life. I argue that, in light of Causal Inseparability, prudence is best seen as what I call a “rational” cause of the pleasant life, that is, a cause that furnishes reasons for and thereby rationally necessitates pleasure.

Keywords: Epicureanism, prudence, pleasure, cause.

Introduction

At *Letter to Menoeceus* 132, Epicurus stresses the importance of the virtue of prudence (φρόνησις) for the life of pleasure. He asserts there that prudence is “more valuable” (τιμιώτερον) even than philosophy. This surprising claim is a consequence of his view that the pleasant life is our ultimate aim (τέλος) and that such a life is structured and informed by prudence. Much, however, remains obscure about the Epicurean understanding of the role of prudence in the pleasant life. My aim in the following paper is to make some progress in clarifying the Epicurean conception of the relation between prudence and the pleasant life by examining two theses that are crucial to that conception.

The first thesis, which I shall label “Inseparability,” states that prudence is inseparable from the pleasant life. This claim might be explained in a number of ways, but the Epicureans helpfully express what they mean by it in terms of two further claims. First, there is the claim that it is impossible to live prudently without living pleasantly, so that living prudently is sufficient for living pleasantly. Second, there is the claim that it is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently; hence, living prudently is also necessary for living pleasantly.

In my examination of Inseparability and Causality, I shall proceed as follows. In section I, I focus on Inseparability and, after addressing some ancillary issues connected with Epicurus’ canonical

statement of the thesis, I provide a more rigorous formulation of the thesis. In section II, I switch my discussion to the thesis of Causality. I canvass some of the evidence for Epicurean commitment to the thesis in the form of fragments from a monumental inscription by a 2nd century Epicurean, Diogenes of Oinoanda. These fragments help to illuminate the nature of the causal relation in question. Finally, in section III, I discuss how to integrate Inseparability and Causality in a single thesis: Causal Inseparability. However, my primary aim in this final section is to show how Causal Inseparability implies that prudence is what I call a “rational cause” of pleasure. By this I mean that it furnishes reasons for feeling pleasure and thereby rationally necessitates feelings of pleasure.

1. Inseparability

The earliest, most precise, and fullest statement of the thesis of Inseparability to be found in our evidence occurs towards the end of Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus*. The *Letter* is manifestly an exoteric rather than technical work. Written for the layman as a protreptic synopsis of Epicurean ethics, its generic status has led some scholars to question its reliability on points of technical detail (Hessler, 2014, p. 40-98). Be this as it may, Epicurus’ authorship of the *Letter* makes the expression of the thesis the most authoritative we possess. Moreover, the thesis is expressed in exactly the same form in several other sources, among them the two collections of Epicurean maxims – the Vatican Sayings (5) and the Principal Doctrines (5) – and Cicero (*Fin.* 1. 57, *Tusc.* 5. 9. 26). All of this strongly suggests that the formulation in the *Letter* has a canonical status. Finally, the thesis is of vital importance to Epicurean ethics, for it plays an essential role in explaining the Epicureans’ distinctive conception of the life of pleasure, the τέλος of Epicureanism. Indeed, this is clearly shown in the manner in which the thesis is introduced in the *Letter*.

Epicurus begins by correcting a common misconception about the life of pleasure:

For it is not drinking bouts and continuous partying and enjoying boys and women, or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table, which produce the pleasant life, but sober calculation which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and drives out the opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for men's souls. (*Ep. Men.* 132; trans. Inwood; Gerson, 1997)

In contrast to the immoderate indulgence of extravagant pleasures, the truly pleasant life is produced rather by “sober calculation” (νήφων λογισμὸς) which functions in two distinct but related ways: first, it shapes the choices and avoidance in life by determining the reasons for each and, second, it removes turmoil from men's souls by expelling false beliefs or opinions. Both functions have already been discussed in previous sections of the *Letter*. On the topic of expulsion of false beliefs that disturb the soul, Epicurus has discussed the removal of beliefs at length, touching on various subjects: false beliefs about the gods (123-124), death (124-127), and desire and pleasure (127-128, 131). Likewise, on the topic of finding the reasons for choices/avoidances, Epicurus has sketched, however vaguely and imperfectly, the so-called hedonic calculus at 129-130. The aim of this calculus is to determine what should be chosen and what avoided on the basis of what maximizes pleasure over the longer term.¹ The two functions are deeply related, for the hedonic calculus must be informed by correct beliefs.

Having drawn a contrast between the life of immoderate indulgence and that of sober calculation, Epicurus immediately goes on to introduce the virtue of prudence (φρόνησις):

[1] The principle of all these things and the greatest good is prudence. [2] This is why what is more valuable than philosophy is prudence [φρόνησις], [3] from which all the other virtues have arisen naturally [πεφύκασιν], teaching that [4] [a] it is impossible to

1 For critical discussion of the hedonistic calculus, see Mitsis (1988, p. 27-32) and Annas (1993, p. 189-190, 334-335). For accounts that try to do the calculus greater justice see, especially, Warren (2001) but also Tsouna (2020, p. 149-153).

live pleasantly without living prudently, finely, and justly [φρονίμως καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως], and [b] impossible to live prudently, finely, and justly without living pleasantly. [5] [a] For the virtues are naturally united [συμπεφύκασιν] with the pleasant life and [b] the pleasant life is inseparable [ἀχώριστον] from them. (*Ep. Men.* 132; trans. Inwood; Gerson, 1997)

This is the first reference to the virtue of prudence in the *Letter* and its appearance is liable to seem curiously sudden and somewhat unmotivated unless we see how it connects to the earlier discussion of the two lives. The connection in question is provided by the reference in [1] to “all these things” (Τούτων...πάντων). What things does Epicurus have in mind? Proximity suggests that he is thinking of the twin functions of sober calculation, but this is not the only reason to think he is referring to them. Epicurus is taking special care to emphasize the connection between the prudent life and the pleasant life, clearly intending to contrast the prudent life with the vicious life of extravagant indulgence he mentioned earlier. If prudence is the principle of the twin functions of sober calculation – so that sober calculation is just prudence in operation – then the switch to a discussion of prudence makes clear sense.² Such a reading, moreover, has the benefit of making more precise Epicurus’ understanding of the nature of prudence.

The thesis of Inseparability is the focus of [4]–[5], but the account given there is complicated by certain other features of Epicurus’ discussion tangential to Inseparability; it will help to clear these up in order to show precisely how Epicurus understands Inseparability.

To begin with, there is Epicurus’ assertion in [3] that all the virtues other than prudence “have arisen naturally” (πεφύκασιν) from prudence. This claim has been recognized as ambiguous between what we may call a “Socratic” or “Stoic” reading and an

2 The question of the reference of Τούτων...πάντων has occasioned some discussion among scholars. See, for instance, Morel (2010, p. 21–22), Warren (2014, p. 218), and Morel (2019, p. 376). I have here tried to provide some reasons to prefer the most natural and obvious reading; I am thereby largely agreeing with Robitzsch (2024, p. 85, n. 16).

“Aristotelian” one (Mitsis, 1988, p. 71; Robitzsch, 2024, p. 85-86). On the former reading, each virtue is a *form* of prudence, whereas on the Aristotelian reading, while each virtue is entailed by prudence, they are distinct from it and not forms of it. The language of the passage certainly suggests the Socratic/Stoic reading. As James Warren notes, the virtues naturally arise from prudence “in the sense not only that they invariably and regularly come to be in someone who possesses wisdom [i.e., prudence] but also in the sense that they are as they are – they derive their nature – from wisdom” (Warren, 2014, p. 219). Other bits of our evidence support this understanding. Thus, Diogenes Laertius (X 120) notes that for the Epicureans “courage does not arise by nature, but by calculation of benefit” and on the natural assumption that calculation is the activity of prudence, this certainly suggests that courage is an instance of prudence. Similarly, the Epicurean account of the virtues provided by the character of Torquatus in Cicero’s *De finibus bonorum et malorum* I (43-54) strongly suggests that they are all forms of prudence. Indeed, the treatment of each of the four cardinal virtues is so similar to the others, one could be forgiven for seeing them as ultimately instances of one and the same thing (Mitsis, 1988, p. 71).

On the other hand, one might worry that a view of the virtues as all simply forms of prudence coheres poorly with some other theses of Epicureanism. Thus, Mitsis worries that “[f]or Epicurus, each virtue has its own corresponding *prolepsis* (preconception); thus, it...would be awkward for him to treat individual virtues as if they were not discrete or separable entities” (Mitsis, 1988, p. 76). Mitsis’ concern seems to be that if each virtue is simply an instance of prudence, then not only will all virtues be indistinguishable from prudence, but they will be indistinguishable from each other. One way out of this problem is to conceive of the relation between prudence and the other virtues as rather more like a genus-species relation. On such a view, all virtues will be species of the genus prudence, distinguished from each other by certain differentia. Thus, courage would be prudence concerning what is fearful and what is not, temperance would be prudence concerning what pleasures are to be foregone and which embraced, and so forth (cf. McConnell, 2017,

p. 182). Even prudence itself, as a genus, might be distinguished from the individual virtues which are its species. Furthermore, such a genus-species view coheres nicely with the view that the individual virtues derive their nature from prudence. On this view, all the virtues would originate in prudence and would be distinct forms of it, but they would not be indistinguishable from it.

A second complication in Epicurus' discussion concerns the precise form of his assertions in [4][a]-[b]. It is somewhat puzzling why Epicurus refers not just to living "prudently" (φρονίμως) but also "finely and justly" (καλῶς καὶ δικαίως). Indeed, removing the latter would seem to make his point more immediately and link [4] to [5] more naturally. Some commentators have insisted that "finely and justly" refer to two particular virtues to be distinguished from each other as well as other virtues (Robitzsch, 2020, p. 6). But, as Robitzsch has persuasively argued, "there is no textual evidence that the *kalon* refers to an individual virtue" (Robitzsch, 2020, p. 7). Instead, *kalon* can refer to virtuous conduct more generally. Robitzsch notes that much the same can be said about justice, for although it *can* be used to pick out a particular, distinctive and specific virtue, it also is employed by Aristotle to speak of the virtues in general, and it seems to have this use here (Robitzsch, 2020, p. 8). One possibility that Robitzsch suggests, therefore, is that "prudently, finely and justly" functions as a hendiatis, picking out virtuous actions quite generally (Robitzsch, 2024, p. 85).

While I am sympathetic to Robitzsch's approach and point, I am less convinced that the phrase functions as a hendiatis for virtuous conduct. There is, it seems to me, a more plausible alternative. To begin with, we should note that the conjunction of καλῶς and δικαίως, whether in just this form or cognate forms, functions on a number of occasions in Plato, Aristotle, and others as, instead, a hendiadys denoting virtuous action in general.³ Second, we can read

3 For examples of this, see Plato: *R.* 443e5, 464e5-6, 506a4, 538c6-7, *Lg.* 854c2, and *Grg.* 491e7; Aristotle: *EN* 1094b15, 1095b5, and 1144a10; Xenophon: *Mem.* 2. 2. 13. 9, *An.* 2. 6. 18. 3, *Cyr.* 8. 3. 38. 4, and *Ages.* 1. 37. 1.

the first καὶ as a conjunction, but it is also open to us to read it as epexegetic in relation to the adverb φρονίμως. In effect, so read, [4] [a] would be saying that it is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, that is, finely and justly, and likewise, for [4] [b]. In other words, Epicurus would be drawing attention to the fact that living prudently *just is* living virtuously, thereby deriving an implication of the claim in [3]. Regardless of whether we take this approach, it seems clear that Epicurus thinks that whether we talk of “all the virtues” or simply of “prudence” is a small matter, since the two references are largely interchangeable because logically equivalent.

The thesis of Inseparability is stated most succinctly at [5][b]: the virtues are inseparable from the pleasant life. However, in light of the relation between the virtues and prudence, we can regard the statement as equivalent to the claim that prudence is inseparable from the pleasant life. Likewise, in [5][a] it is claimed that the virtues are “naturally united” with the pleasant life, so that we can conclude that prudence is “naturally united” with the pleasant life. There is something of a question of the relation between [5][a] and [b]: how is the natural unity of prudence and the pleasant life connected to the inseparability of the two? On one reading, it could be that the natural unity *explains* the inseparability, but perhaps that is to make more of the καὶ than is warranted. Alternatively, Epicurus may simply be pointing out a logical equivalence between the two claims. Regardless, it is clear that there is a close connection between the two and, more importantly, that the claims entail and explain the two modal claims in [4][a]-[b].

The two modal claims in [4][a]-[b] equip us with an understanding of how close the relation is between the prudent life and the pleasant life. The claims reveal that the prudent life is necessary and sufficient for the pleasant life. Thanks to Epicurus’ mention of the two functions of prudence, it is possible to be a bit more precise about what the prudent life involves. The prudent life is a life structured, on the one hand, by the hedonic calculus and, on the other, by the expulsion of false and disturbing beliefs. Of course, not

just any life involving pleasure will be a pleasant life; rather, a pleasant life must be one in which pleasure outweighs pain. Hence, Inseparability asserts that a life structured and informed by the hedonic calculus and the expulsion of false and disturbing beliefs is necessary and sufficient for a life in which pleasure outweighs pain.

2. Causality

Inseparability describes the relation between the prudent life and pleasant life in sufficiently abstract terms that it leaves several questions unanswered. Most saliently, there is the question of whether the two lives are identical. Some interpreters (Annas, 1993, p. 339-343; Sedley, 2002, p. 166) have thought so and it must be granted that, if they are identical, then Inseparability makes a good deal of sense. Of course the prudent life is necessary and sufficient for the pleasant life, for they are identical! But there is reason to be skeptical of this identity claim. The basis for this skepticism is the Epicureans' commitment to another important thesis, which I will call "Causality." This is the thesis that prudence is causally responsible for pleasure. According to Causality, prudence in operation produces pleasure, so that the causal effect of a life of prudence is a life of pleasure. On the assumption that a cause and its effect are non-identical, it follows that the prudent life is distinct from the pleasant life.

Causality together with the Epicurean commitment to the view that the pleasant life is the *τέλος* explain the Epicurean adherence to a conception of prudence and the prudent life as a purely instrumental means to pleasure and the pleasant life. This adherence is well-expressed by Diogenes Laertius: "On account of pleasure even the virtues are to be chosen, not on account of themselves, just as medicine on account of health" (X 138). The life of virtue – or, what comes to the same thing, the prudent life – is choiceworthy only because it is a means to the pleasant life, but in itself it is not choiceworthy at all. The Epicurean commitment to the purely instrumental status of the prudent life helps to explain some of their

more critical remarks about the virtues (Athenaeus 12 547a (= U 512)). Thus, for instance, apparently quoting from Epicurus' lost work *On the Telos*, Athenaeus writes:

One must honour the noble, and the virtues and things like that, *if* they produce pleasure. But if they do not, one must bid them goodbye. (Athenaeus 12 546f (= U 70); trans. Inwood; Gerson, 1997)

But care needs to be exercised in interpreting these remarks, for otherwise they will be in manifest tension with the thesis of Inseparability. So, for instance, the previous remark makes it sound like it is possible that one live the prudent life without living the pleasant life, but Inseparability clearly rules this contingency out.

For clear statements of Causality, we need to turn to a relatively late source: Diogenes of Oinoanda's monumental inscription of Epicurean doctrines and disputes from the 2nd century AD, specifically fragments 32-33. In the first fragment, Diogenes castigates opponents for believing that virtue is the τέλος, rather than the means to it.

If, gentlemen, the agenda between these people and us involved the question "What is it that produces [ποιητικόν] happiness?", and they wished to say the virtues, which is actually true, all I would need to do is to agree the point with them and leave it at that. But since, as I say, the agenda is not "What is it that produces [ποιητικόν] happiness?", but "What is it that being happy is [ἔστιν] and that in the last analysis our nature desires?", my answer is pleasure, and I cry out loudly both now and always to all Greeks and foreigners alike that pleasure is the end of the best way of life. As for the virtues, which as it is these people inopportunely garble by transferring them from the place of that which is productive [ποιητικοῦ] of happiness to that of the end [τέλους], I say that they are by no means the end [τέλος], but productive [ποιητικὰς] of the end [τέλους]. Let us then state the truth of this now, making the following start. (32 I 6-III 11; trans. Sedley, 2002; Greek text Smith, 1992).

Diogenes quite explicitly and emphatically draws attention to the distinction between, on the one hand, what is “productive” of happiness and, on the other, what happiness “is” or what is “the end.” He emphasizes here that virtue is productive of happiness but is not happiness or the end of life itself. He takes care, moreover, to note that this end or happiness is, in fact, pleasure, making plain that virtue is productive of pleasure. In describing virtue as ποιητικόν, Diogenes seems to intend to capture the causal character of virtue; indeed, ποιητικόν and cognates are often best translated “cause,” as will be seen in subsequent fragments of Diogenes.

Another fragment from Diogenes that also helps us understand the Epicurean conception of the causal relation between prudence and pleasure is 33. In this fragment, Diogenes is convicting his opponents, who may be either the Stoics or the Cyrenaics,⁴ of an error in their thinking about the temporal features of the relevant causal relation. He charges that his opponents assume that all causes precede their effects, but that, in fact, causes may precede, follow or coincide with their effects. Since virtues are coincident causes, I shall focus on his discussion of these. He begins by providing some examples of coincident causes:

Examples of coincident causes [συνχρονεῖ] are [solid] and liquid nourishment and, in addition to these, [sexual acts]: we do not eat [food] and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we drink [wine] and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we emit semen and experience pleasure afterwards; rather the action [ἡ πράξις] brings about [ἀνύτει] these pleasures for us immediately [πάραιτα], [without awaiting] the future. (33 VI 11-VII 11; trans. Sedley, 2002; Greek text Smith, 1992).

Diogenes then concludes by specifying the virtues as among such coincident causes:

4 The actual identity of Diogenes’ opponents has been the source of some debate in the literature. Sedley (2002) and Tsouna (2017) have argued that the opponents are the Cyrenaics, while Smith (1992; 2003) has argued in favour of the Stoics. For discussion of the debate, see Masi (2017).

Now you, being unable to mark off these distinctions, and being unaware that the virtues have are among the causes that coincide with their effects [τῶν συγχρονούντων ποιητικῶν] (for they are borne along [συνεπιφέρονται] with [pleasure]), go completely astray]. (33 VIII 7-14; trans. Sedley, 2002; Greek text Smith, 1992)

From these revealing fragments, we learn a great deal about the nature of the relation between virtue and pleasure. Virtues are coincident causes, which means they are simultaneous with their effects. Diogenes considers examples of these: pleasure in drinking, eating, and sex. In each of these cases, pleasure arises simultaneously with the “action,” by which he presumably means the actual eating, drinking, and sexual release. Transferring this to the case of virtue, we must suppose that in the actual exercise of a virtue – in its operation or activity – there is simultaneously the generation of pleasure: it is pleasant to do virtuous things or doing virtuous things simultaneously produces a feeling of pleasure.

The thesis of Causality asserts that the prudent life is causally responsible for the pleasant life: it produces that life and sustains it. The life shaped and informed by prudence is a life structured by the operation of prudence. Since prudence in operation produces pleasure simultaneously, it follows that the life shaped and informed by prudence will simultaneously produce a life involving pleasure. Returning to Epicurus’ account of the operation of prudence, we can make the thesis a little more precise still. For, as we noted in the previous section, prudence operates in two ways according to Epicurus. It determines the correct choices and avoidances on the basis of the hedonic calculus and it expels those false beliefs that cause disturbance in the soul. Since prudence in operation produces pleasure simultaneously, presumably both modes of operation of prudence produce simultaneous pleasure. On the one hand, pleasure arises from determining the correct choices and avoidances on the basis of the hedonic calculus; on the other, pleasure arises from expelling false and disturbing beliefs.

The idea that the expulsion of false and disturbing beliefs should generate pleasure is quite unsurprising and in full conformity with other elements of Epicurean thought. Most notoriously, there is the Epicurean claim that:

The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. Wherever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress, nor both together. (*Sent.* 3; trans. Inwood; Gerson, 1997)

The false and disturbing beliefs concern such things as the gods, death, pleasure, and desire. They generate anxiety in the soul, which is dispelled when the beliefs themselves are expelled and, presumably, replaced by true beliefs that are not disturbing; the result of this is pleasure. Moreover, the pleasure follows immediately upon and simultaneously with the belief being expelled.

It is a little more surprising that the determination of the correct choices and avoidances according to the hedonic calculus should generate pleasure, but this too conforms to Epicurean doctrine. Cicero's Epicurean Torquatus remarks: "We are cheered by the prospect of future goods" (*Fin.* 1. 57) and this is precisely what the determination of the correct choices and avoidances in light of the hedonic calculus yields. For in determining what to choose, what to avoid, we determine what will generate the most pleasure over the longer term and thereby anticipate future pleasures, which furnishes pleasure in the present. As Sedley notes, "*present* pleasure can be derived from one's confident expectations about future pleasure" (Sedley, 2002, p. 166) and such confident expectation is precisely what is provided by determinations of what to choose and what to avoid in light of the hedonic calculus.

3. What Kind of Cause is Prudence?

The Epicurean commitment to Causality and Inseparability shapes their conception of the relation between the prudent life and the pleasant life. According to Causality, the prudent life is causally

responsible for the pleasant life; according to Inseparability, the prudent life is necessary and sufficient for the pleasant life. The Epicurean adherence to both theses raises the question of how to integrate them with each other. Causality specifies the kind of relation that obtains between the prudent and the pleasant life – namely, a causal one. By contrast, Inseparability places constraints on that causal relation by making it necessary and sufficient. Inseparability, therefore, qualifies Causality and specifies the nature of the causal relation between the prudent life and the pleasant life.

If the causal relation between the prudent and pleasant life is necessary and sufficient, it follows that not only is the prudent life a cause that necessitates the pleasant life (this is the sufficiency condition), but the prudent life is a cause that is necessary for the pleasant life (this is the necessity condition). Let us call the thesis that the prudent life is a necessary and sufficient cause for the pleasant life the “Causal Inseparability” thesis, for it asserts that the prudent life is a cause of the pleasant life that is inseparable from it. We can render this thesis a little more precise by specifying the nature of the prudent life as well as the pleasant life with a little more care. Recall that the prudent life is a life shaped and informed by the hedonic calculus and the expulsion of false, disturbing beliefs, while the pleasant life is a life in which pleasure outweighs pain. Causal Inseparability, therefore, states that the life lived in accordance with the hedonic calculus and the expulsion of false, disturbing beliefs is a necessary and sufficient cause for the life in which pleasure outweighs pain.

As noted, Causal Inseparability asserts that the prudent life is a necessary and sufficient cause of the pleasant life. Our discussion of Causality revealed that the prudent life causes the pleasant life by virtue of the operation of prudence causally producing pleasure. If, then, the prudent life is a necessary and sufficient cause of the pleasant life, it is presumably by virtue of the operation of prudence being a necessary and sufficient cause of pleasure. Certainly, our discussion of Causality confirms that the operation or “action” of prudence is a cause of pleasure; Inseparability then qualifies this

claim, adding that the operation of prudence is necessary and sufficient for pleasure. The upshot is the form of Causal Inseparability I want to consider in this section: the operation of prudence is a necessary and sufficient cause of pleasure.

There are myriad questions one might raise about Causal Inseparability as well as the Epicurean adherence to it. However, in this section, I would like to consider only one. The question is relatively straightforward: what kind of cause is prudence? Causes come in many different varieties and it is far from obvious what the exact nature of prudence is as cause. Nevertheless, I shall argue in what follows that prudence is best seen as the kind of cause that furnishes reasons: what I will call a “rational cause.” I shall explain in a little more detail what I mean by this as my discussion progresses.

As noted, Causal Inseparability involves both a necessity claim and a sufficiency claim. However, in order to make my argument that prudence is a rational cause of pleasure, I will be focusing only on the causal sufficiency claim, that is, the claim that prudence rationally necessitates pleasure. This claim can be expanded. Causal sufficiency implies that determining choices through the hedonic calculus is a sufficient cause of pleasure and expelling false beliefs is a sufficient cause of pleasure. These latter claims may not seem implausible or anyway uncontroversial, at least in light of the Epicureans’ other commitments. At the end of the previous section, I explained how both the hedonic calculus and the expulsion of false beliefs could causally generate pleasure, in the one case, the pleasure of anticipating future pleasures and, in the other, the pleasure of removing disturbing beliefs.

However, while the previous section described how the operation of prudence might causally generate pleasure, it did not show how the operation of prudence could *necessitate* pleasure. This, after all, is what the causal sufficiency thesis requires. For, according to this thesis, it is impossible for prudence to operate and for pleasure to fail to be causally produced. To show how causal sufficiency obtains, therefore, the Epicureans need to show that it is impossible to live in

accord with the hedonic calculus or the expulsion of false beliefs without experiencing pleasure as a result, something that is much more difficult to show.

In showing why this is so difficult to establish, it helps to note that we must distinguish between, on the one hand, feeling pleasure and, on the other, the activity of hedonic calculation or expulsion of false beliefs; the two are not identical. It is, however, easy to assimilate the two and suppose that to expel false beliefs *just is* to feel pleasure of their removal or to calculate that a certain choice will maximize pleasure *just is* to feel the pleasure of anticipation. If this were so, then it would indeed be impossible to fail to feel pleasure despite the operation of prudence. But this cannot be right, for the lesson of the previous section is that the relation between pleasure and prudence is a causal one and the cause is distinct from the effect. Hence, we must distinguish between the feeling of pleasure (the effect) and the activity of prudence (the cause). The trouble is that as soon as we draw such a distinction, it becomes possible to fail to feel pleasure despite the operation of prudence. This is obvious from the examples that Diogenes of Oinoanda canvasses of causes simultaneous with their effects. Take, for example, the case of eating: it is one thing to eat food and consume it, it is quite another thing to take pleasure in that consumption. The two can come apart, as when one has already eaten enough and is full and no longer desires food; in such a case, one might eat food yet fail to take any pleasure in it. Diogenes Laertius notes (X 138) that this is one way food and everything else is to be distinguished from prudence or virtue, namely, virtue *always* produces pleasure, whereas food and everything else sometimes do and sometimes do not.

Certainly, it must be the case that the causal relation between prudence and pleasure is quite different from the causal relation between, for instance, food and pleasure; the question is only in what the difference consists. One obvious difference between the two is that food consumption causes bodily pleasure while prudence causes mental pleasure. This suggests that the relation between prudence and pleasure will be a distinct kind of relation from that between eating

and pleasure. Of course, this raises the question of the kind of relation in question; one possibility is the following. The operation of prudence, whether in the hedonic calculus or in the expulsion of false, disturbing beliefs, works by furnishing reasons to feel mental pleasure. The determination of what to do on the basis of the hedonic calculus, which tells me what will maximize pleasure in the longer term, gives me reason to feel pleasure. Similarly, the expulsion of false beliefs removes those beliefs that provide a rational basis for discomfort, so that I have reason to feel pleasure. In either case, the operation of prudence gives me reason to feel pleasure and, in this way, causes me to feel pleasure, that is, rationally.

The conception of prudence as a rational cause of pleasure helps us to understand how prudence might causally necessitate pleasure. For if prudence provides reason for pleasure, then it follows that the *failure* to feel pleasure despite the operation of prudence will be a failure of rationality. In other words, it would be irrational for one to fail to feel pleasure due to the operation of prudence. But here it is important to notice that it is still *possible* for one to fail to feel pleasure despite the operation of prudence. After all, it is possible for anyone to be irrational or to exhibit a failure of rationality. In saying that prudence is a rational cause that necessitates (or is sufficient for) pleasure, the Epicureans are saying only that one cannot fail to feel pleasure due to the operation of prudence *on pain of being irrational*. The advantage of so interpreting causal sufficiency is that it does not ascribe to the Epicureans the implausible view that it is absolutely impossible to fail to feel pleasure despite the operation of prudence; instead, it ascribes the much weaker and more plausible view that prudence is a rationally sufficient cause of pleasure.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to illuminate certain features of the Epicurean conception of the relation between prudence and pleasure by examining a combination of theses to which the Epicureans committed; the two theses I label “Inseparability” and

“Causality.” In section I, I discussed the Epicurean thesis of Inseparability: that prudence is inseparable from the pleasant life. This thesis asserts that it is impossible to live prudently without living pleasantly and impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently. After addressing some ancillary issues, I provided a more precise formulation of the thesis of Inseparability. In section II, I shifted attention to the thesis of Causality: that prudence is a cause of pleasure. I surveyed one of our principal sources for information on prudence’s causal role, namely, the monumental inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda, in particular, fragments 32-33. Finally, in section III, I did two things. First, I brought together the two theses and discussed how they relate to each other. The upshot is a thesis combining the two of them: Causal Inseparability. This thesis asserts that prudence is a necessary and sufficient cause of pleasure. Second, I argued for a specific understanding of the kind of cause prudence is in light of the fact that prudence is a sufficient cause of pleasure. According to my argument, prudence causes pleasure by furnishing reasons to feel pleasure; these reasons rationally necessitate the relevant pleasures.

Data availability

Not applicable.

Bibliography

ANNAS, J. (1993). *The Morality of Happiness*, New York, Oxford University Press.

ANNAS, J. (ed.) (2001). *Cicero: On Moral Ends*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

HESSLER, J. E., (ed.) (2014). *Epikur: Brief an Menoikeus*. Basel, Schwabe Verlag.

INWOOD, B.; GERSON, L. (eds.) (1997). *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*. Indianapolis, Hackett.

MASI, F. (2017). Virtue, Pleasure, and Cause. A Case of Multi-Target Polemic? In HAMMERSTAEDT, J.; MOREL, P.-M.; GÜREMEN, R. (eds.). *Diogenes of Oinoanda: Epicureanism and Philosophical Debates*. Leuven, Leuven University Press, p. 111-141.

MCCONNELL, S. (2017). The Epicurean Virtue of μεγαλοψυχία. *Classical Philology* 112, n. 2, p. 175-199.

MITIS, P. (1988). *Epicurus' Ethical Theory*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

MOREL, P.-M. (2010). Prudence aristotélicienne et prudence épicurienne. In COITINHO SILVEIRA, D.; HOBUSS, J. (eds.). *Virtudes, Direitos e Democracia*, Pelotas, Editora Universitária UFPL, p. 11-30.

MOREL, P.-M. (2019). Épicure et la phronesis: Une autre sagesse pratique. In MASI, F.; MASO, S.; VIANO, C. (eds.). *Ēthikē theōria: Studi sull' Etica Nicomachea in onore di Carlo Natali*. Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, p. 365-384.

ROBITZSCH, J. M. (2020). The Presentation of the Epicurean Virtues. *Apeiron* 53, n. 4, p. 419-435.

ROBITZSCH, J. M. (2024). *Epicurean Justice: Nature, Agreement, and Virtue*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

SEDLEY, D. (2002). Diogenes of Oenoanda on Cyrenaic Hedonism. *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 48, p. 159-174.

SMITH, M. F. (ed.) (1992). *Diogenes of Oinoanda: The Epicurean Inscription*. Naples, Bibliopolis.

SMITH, M. F. (ed.) (2003). *Supplement to Diogenes of Oinoanda: The Epicurean Inscription*. Naples, Bibliopolis.

TSOUNA, V. (2017). Diogenes of Oinoanda and the Cyrenaics. In HAMMERSTAEDT, J.; MOREL, P.-M.; GÜREMEN, R. (eds.). *Diogenes of Oinoanda: Epicureanism and Philosophical Debates*. Leuven, Leuven University Press, p. 143-164.

TSOUNA, V. (2020). Hedonism. In MITIS, P. (ed.). *Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 141-188.

WARREN, J. (2001). Epicurus and the Pleasures of the Future. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 21, p. 135-179.

WARREN, J. (2014). Epicurus and the Unity of the Virtues. In COLETTE-DUCIC, B.; DELCOMMINETTE, S. (eds.). *Unité et origine des vertus dans la philosophie ancienne*. Brussels, Ousia, p. 213-236.

Editors: Gabriele Cornelli e Beatriz de Paoli

Submitted in 13/01/2026 and accepted for publication 21/04/2026



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Do you wish to submit a paper to *Archai* Journal? Please, access <http://www.scielo.br/archai> and learn our *Submission Guidelines*.
