

Who Was The Most Recent Explicitly Epicurean Philosopher?

Post by “Cassius” of April 11, 2025 at 9:56 AM

We've had lots of threads in the past about people who were Epicurean-adjacent or somewhat Epicurean, but I thought I'd ask the AI engines: "Who was the last philosopher who explicitly followed Epicurus?" to see if it produced any unexpected names. The only one chatgpt produced with which I wasn't very familiar was Giulio Vanini, though I did see him recently mentioned in the Matthew Stewart book.

Though he's regularly mentioned I don't think we have a thread here on Michael Onfrey - maybe we should, as both Chatgpt and Grok refer to him. I'd also like to know if anything relevant survives from [Vanini](#).

ChatGPT said:

Identifying the last philosopher who explicitly followed Epicurus depends on how one defines both “philosopher” and “explicitly followed.” However, a few noteworthy modern figures continued to advocate for Epicurean ideas in a conscious and deliberate manner, often citing Epicurus by name and aligning themselves with his core doctrines:

1. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

Jefferson famously declared himself an Epicurean in a 1819 letter to William Short, writing:

"I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy..."

Though Jefferson was not a professional philosopher in the academic sense, he deeply engaged with Epicurean ethics and incorporated its principles into his vision of personal liberty and political philosophy.

2. Frances Wright (1795–1852)

Wright was a 19th-century Scottish-American writer and social reformer who openly promoted Epicurean materialism and ethics, including the pursuit of pleasure grounded in reason. She wrote and lectured extensively on Epicureanism and defended it against Christian moralism.

3. Giulio Cesare Vanini (1585–1619)

A lesser-known Italian philosopher, Vanini revived atomist and Epicurean ideas during the Renaissance and was eventually executed for his views. He defended naturalistic explanations

of the world, aligning with Epicurean physics and atheistic interpretations.

4. Michel Onfray (b. 1959)

In more recent times, French philosopher Michel Onfray has advocated for a return to Epicurean philosophy. His "La puissance d'exister" (The Strength to Exist) and "Le Ventre des philosophes" (The Philosophers' Stomach) draw directly on Epicurus, promoting hedonism, materialism, and atheism. Onfray identifies himself with the Epicurean tradition and critiques the neglect of Epicurus in mainstream philosophical discourse.

Summary

While Thomas Jefferson and Frances Wright were among the last historically prominent individuals to explicitly identify with Epicurus in a philosophical sense, Michel Onfray is arguably the most active contemporary philosopher to carry the Epicurean torch into the 21st century.

Grok3 said:

Identifying the last philosopher who explicitly followed Epicurus is tricky, as Epicureanism has waxed and waned over centuries, often blending with other schools of thought. The most prominent figure historically tied to explicitly following Epicurus is likely Lucretius, the Roman poet and philosopher of the 1st century BCE, whose work *De Rerum Natura* is a detailed exposition of Epicurean philosophy, particularly its physics, ethics, and rejection of superstition. Lucretius didn't just parrot Epicurus; he adapted and expanded his ideas for a Roman audience, making him a clear disciple.

After Lucretius, Epicureanism continued in various forms, but explicit followers become harder to pin down. By the late Roman period, Epicureanism was often criticized or absorbed into other traditions, like Stoicism or early Christian thought. In later centuries, figures like Pierre Gassendi in the 17th century revived Epicurean ideas, particularly atomism and hedonistic ethics, but Gassendi's work was more of a synthesis, blending Epicurus with Christian theology, so it's not "pure" Epicureanism.

If we're looking for someone more modern who explicitly identified with Epicurus without heavy reinterpretation, you'd likely end up with niche thinkers or scholars rather than major philosophers. For instance, in the 19th and 20th centuries, some secular humanists or utilitarians (like certain followers of Bentham or Mill) echoed Epicurean themes—pleasure as the highest good, avoidance of pain—but they didn't explicitly call themselves Epicureans.

The truth is, after Lucretius, Epicureanism as a distinct, explicit tradition faded, resurfacing more as an influence than a direct lineage. If you're after someone specific beyond Lucretius, I'd need more context on what counts as "explicitly following" for you—does it mean verbatim agreement, or just heavy inspiration? Alternatively, I can dig into specific periods or regions for you. What do you think?

If you're looking for a specific name, I'd say the trail goes cold after Lucretius for truly "pure" followers, with later figures like Gassendi or Jefferson being the closest but still not fully aligned. If you want me to explore a particular era or community further, let me know—maybe there's a modern Epicurean hiding in plain sight. What's your take on what "purely" means here? That might help narrow it down.