

Nietzsche As Potentially The Most Well-Known Modern Philosopher With Core Views Parallel With Epicurus

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I decided it would be interesting to do some research on what famous modern philosopher might be closest to Epicurus in core philosophic views. I generated a draft of the following using AI and then edited the entire document in way that I understand myself to be correct given my "generalist" understanding of Nietzsche.

I feel sure that an expert on Nietzsche would quibble with some particulars but I also feel sure that in general the following is correct, and is useful in pointing out important parallels that over time should be explored further. As I write this I am unaware of any major "modern" philosopher whose core views on the problems with philosophers who (1) seek a "true world" beyond the senses and (2) seek to universalize morality based on logic and reason alone, rather than grounding it in the feelings given us by nature.

NIETZSCHE AS A PARALLEL VOICE — THE “TRUE WORLD” AND THE ATTACK ON SECULARIZED CHRISTIANITY

1 Why Nietzsche Is Relevant to Understanding Epicurus

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is not an Epicurean, and significant differences exist between them — most notably on the role of suffering, which Nietzsche valued in ways Epicurus would not. Nevertheless Nietzsche is the single most useful modern parallel for understanding what Epicurus was fighting against, because Nietzsche identified and attacked the same philosophical enemies with the same fundamental diagnosis: that an entire tradition of Western philosophy from Socrates onward had been built on a life-denying lie.

Nietzsche himself recognized the kinship. He wrote admiringly of Epicurus on multiple occasions, describing him as one of the few philosophers who had genuinely faced the question of how to live and answered it affirmatively. Anyone seeking to understand the *tone* and *urgency* of the Epicurean philosophical project — why it was not merely an academic debate but a battle for the soul of human civilization — will find Nietzsche’s work indispensable.

2 The “True World” — Nietzsche’s Diagnosis in *Twilight of the Idols*

In *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche includes a section titled **“How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable”** — a six-step history of one of the most consequential philosophical errors in Western thought. The section is short enough to summarize fully, because it maps almost perfectly onto the Epicurean critique:

Step 1 — Plato: The “true world” is attainable for the wise philosopher. It is the realm of ideal Forms, accessible through reason to the virtuous person. This world we live in — the sensory world — is the *apparent* world, a pale and deceptive shadow.

Step 2 — Early Christianity: The “true world” is no longer attainable *now*, but is promised to the virtuous after death. The transcendent realm becomes Heaven. The sensory world is not merely inferior but actively corrupt and sinful.

Step 3 — Kant: The “true world” is no longer promised or attained, but is posited as a *regulative ideal* — a “thing in itself” (*Ding an sich*) that lies permanently beyond the reach of human experience but which reason tells us must exist. We cannot know it, but we must act as if it grounds our moral obligations.

Step 4 — Positivism: The “true world” is an unattained and unattainable idea and therefore useless. It is abolished as a concept — but the shadow remains, because the “apparent world” has been defined in opposition to it for so long that it too loses its footing.

Step 5 — Nietzsche himself: The “true world” is abolished. With it, the “apparent world” is also abolished — because the distinction was always false. There is only *the world*: the world of becoming, of the senses, of life.

Step 6: *“The true world — we have abolished it. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.”* — **Noon; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.**

This six-step history is the story of the error that Epicurus first identified and attacked. Plato invented the “true world.” Christianity colonized it. Kant rehabilitated it in secular philosophical dress. Nietzsche finally named it as a fable and declared it finished.

Epicurus reached this conclusion over two thousand years before Nietzsche — and reached it not through despair or nihilism but through the affirmative discovery that *this* world, understood through the senses and reason, is sufficient for a life of genuine happiness.

3 Kant’s “Dignity of Man” as Secularized Christianity

Nietzsche’s attack on Kant is essential context for understanding why the Epicurean critique of Platonism and Stoicism is still urgently relevant today. The dominant modern ethical tradition — particularly in its Kantian form — perpetuates precisely the error Epicurus identified, now stripped of explicit theological language but retaining the same structure.

Kant's ethical system rests on the **categorical imperative**: the claim that reason alone, operating without reference to pleasure, pain, desire, or consequence, can generate universal and absolute moral obligations binding on all rational beings at all times and places. The foundation of this system is the concept of **the dignity of rational humanity** — the idea that human beings as rational agents possess an intrinsic, unconditional worth that must never be treated merely as a means to an end.

Nietzsche's devastating observation — with which Epicurus would have agreed — is that this is **Christianity with the theological vocabulary removed**. Consider the structural parallels:

- In Christian theology: God grounds absolute universal moral law, accessible through divine revelation, binding on all humans regardless of circumstance.
- In Kant: Reason grounds absolute universal moral law, accessible through pure rational reflection, binding on all rational beings regardless of circumstance.

The *move* is identical in both cases: a source of absolute universal obligation is posited that transcends sensory experience, individual circumstance, and the natural guidance of pleasure and pain. Whether that source is called "God's will" or "the moral law of pure reason" or "the dignity of humanity," the Epicurean response is the same: there is no such source. Nature, speaking through pleasure and pain, is the only guide we have and the only one we need. Justice is not a universal absolute — it is a contextual compact. The "good" is not an absolute form — it is what actually produces pleasurable living for real human beings in real circumstances.

Nietzsche makes this point with characteristic force: Kant's ethics is an attempt to preserve the *authority* of the Christian moral framework after the theological foundation for it has collapsed. It is the shadow of God projected onto Reason. Epicurus, writing centuries before Christianity, had already dismantled the philosophical architecture on which this move depends.

4 Anti-Humanism: The Universe Is Not About Us

A third area of convergence between Nietzsche and Epicurus, and one that is easily overlooked, is their shared rejection of what might be called **cosmic humanism** — the idea that the universe has a human-directed purpose, that human reason holds a privileged position in the natural order, or that there exist universal moral norms grounded in "human nature" or "human dignity" as such.

Epicurus was explicit and early on this point:

- The universe was not made for humans. Lucretius devotes extensive argument in *De Rerum Natura* to demonstrating that the world, with all its hostility, indifference, and waste, cannot possibly be the product of benevolent design for humanity's benefit.
- Human reason is not a divine faculty with special access to higher truth. It is a natural capacity, evolved (in modern terms) for survival, dependent on the senses, and fallible.

- There are no universal moral norms grounded in “human nature” that apply to all people at all times and places. Justice is a compact, varying by circumstance.
- Humans are part of nature — animals among animals — subject to the same atomic processes as everything else.

Nietzsche pressed this further in his attack on what he called the “ascetic ideal” — the whole constellation of values, including Platonism, Christianity, and Kantian moralism, that seeks to elevate the human above nature, to treat suffering as meaningful, to treat instinct and pleasure as base, and to locate human worth in something other than actual living. Against this he posed the **will to power** — not domination of others, but the affirmative self-overcoming of a life-embracing creature. Epicurus would not have used this language, but the underlying rejection of life-denial is the same.

Both thinkers agree on the essential point: philosophy that begins by denigrating the sensory world, promising access to a higher truth, and demanding that we sacrifice present pleasure for abstract universal obligation — whether in the name of God, the Forms, Reason, or the Categorical Imperative — is philosophy in the service of life-denial. It is, in the end, the enemy of happiness.

5 Summary: What Nietzsche Confirms About Epicurus

The following are key parallels between Nietzsche and Epicurus:

- **The senses are reliable.** Both reject the Platonic/Kantian tradition’s demotion of sensory experience to “mere appearance.” Nietzsche writes in *Twilight of the Idols*: “The senses do not lie. What we make of their testimony, that alone introduces lies.”
- **The “true world” is a fable.** The entire tradition of positing a higher, truer reality behind the sensory world — from Plato’s Forms to Kant’s thing-in-itself — is a philosophical error with real human costs.
- **Universal absolute moral law is a fiction.** Whether grounded in God, Reason, or Human Dignity, the claim that there exist binding universal obligations discoverable through pure thought, independent of pleasure, pain, and circumstance, is the philosophical heir of the same error.
- **Stoicism is a symptom, not a cure.** The Stoic counsel to suppress desire, accept fate, and regard pleasure with suspicion is life-denial dressed as wisdom.
- **Life is to be affirmed, not transcended.** The goal of philosophy is not to escape this world but to live in it as fully and happily as possible.

Nietzsche celebrated struggle, suffering, and the overcoming of great obstacles as desirable and even beautiful. This parallels the Epicurean view that pain is to be chosen when the choice will allow pleasure to predominate. Nietzsche had contempt for what might be called “piggish” comfort-seeking, but this too can be reconciled with Epicurus when it is remembered that Epicurean pleasure is not limited to physical stimulation, and that we can find even greater pleasure in mental and other actions which we find more satisfying. In the end, whether viewed through Epicurus or Nietzsche, suffering is not to be engaged in for itself, but because it leads

to maximizing pleasure when pleasure is properly understood.