

Epicurus As A Community Organizer/Activist Rather Than Isolated Thinker/Writer

Post by “Cassius” of June 20, 2026 at 8:57 AM

I've been looking at several aspects of reorganization of the forum, and I thought it would be useful to highlight ways in which Epicurus himself as a model was not just an individual thinker but as a primary part of his effort was working with others to build an organized school. What I am getting at here is that unlike for example Nietzsche or any of hundreds of other philosophers we could name, Epicurus wasn't just an isolated figure writing books and other being a recluse. He affirmatively spent his time building a community, which is not something most other philosophers do. I think that's a major aspect of his life's work that is way too underappreciated

Here are a couple of ways to look at that aspect. I'd appreciate any comments or thoughts about this topic.

1. He built physical communities, not just a body of thought. The Garden was purchased property — a real financial and institutional commitment, not a borrowed lecture hall or public porch. Owning the space made it a permanent base rather than a seminar.
2. He moved his school strategically, city by city. Colophon → Mytilene → Lampsacus → Athens. Each move was deliberate: he was planting Epicurean communities as he went, not wandering in search of patrons. The communities in Lampsacus and Mytilene continued to function after he left.
3. The move to Athens was a competitive act. Athens was where Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum were. Setting up The Garden there was not accidental — it was a direct challenge to the dominant philosophical schools on their own ground.
4. He designed for succession, not just for his own lifetime. His will made specific provisions for the continuation of The Garden, the training of Hermarchus as his successor, and the care of the children of deceased friends. This is institutional thinking, not the behavior of a lone thinker.
5. He instituted continuing rituals. The Twentieth — monthly gathering on the 20th to celebrate Epicurus and Metrodorus — was an organized, repeating community event, not a one-time tribute. It became a tradition that outlasted him by centuries.
6. He maintained a network of communities through letters. His letters were not addressed to individual scholars; they were written to sustain and instruct communities of followers across the Greek world. He was running something closer to a distributed organization.
7. He radically expanded who was included. Women, slaves, and people outside the citizen class were welcome in The Garden. This was not an abstract philosophical position — it required practical decisions about membership, living arrangements, and social norms. Organization, not just theory.

8. He lived as an integral part of the community he built. After settling in Athens around 306 BC he remained there the rest of his life — roughly 35 years. The Garden was not a school he occasionally visited; it was his life. Compare Aristotle, who tutored Alexander and then returned to Athens to found the Lyceum — Epicurus had no patron phase, no royal appointment. He built from within.

Contrast with the major alternatives:

1. Socrates — no written work, no school, no property, no institutional continuity after his death
2. Plato — had the Academy, but it was more lecture-based than residential, and Plato remained an elite Athenian; no movement across cities building communities
3. Aristotle — the Lyceum was a great research institution but Aristotle was as much a scholar and court philosopher as a community builder
4. Democritus — Epicurus's atomic predecessor was a prolific writer but left no school, no organization, no succession
5. Pyrrho — widely admired but left no written work and founded no community; Pyrrhonism organized itself around him after the fact

- His philosophy made the community itself philosophically necessary. Friendship as "the greatest instrument wisdom provides" was not just a nice sentiment — it meant the community was not a byproduct of the philosophy but an expression of it. The Garden had to exist for the philosophy to be practiced, not just understood.

That last bullet may be the most important one for the forum post — it's what makes Epicurus's organizing genuinely distinct and not just a biographical accident.