

Dead Reddit / The "Isms" Thread

Post by "Joshua" of November 24, 2019 at 5:02 PM

I've yet to register an opinion on the -ism question; as Nate has put forth a comprehensive effort at surveying the field, I'll offer it here.

To put it simply—I suppose I mean by that, *To put it frankly*: I haven't found the objections to this usage persuasive, and I doubt whether I can be bothered to police myself in the matter! ☐

I will unhesitatingly grant to our Hellenic friends the etymological point. I share their concerns regarding affinities in language, and I think I can appreciate—at least in outline—their objection to the imported feel of what ought to taste (from their perspective) like a native vintage. It strikes the wrong note, so to speak. I get that. Like grafting Old World vines onto New World rootstock.

And yet for all that, I simply cannot warm to the alternative. A few reasons come to mind.

1. It's inelegant

This is possibly the most bothersome quality. "Epicureanism" to a native English ear sounds very natural. "Epicurean Philosophy" sounds like it was designed by committee. Worse, it sounds like even the committee got tired of saying it, and switched to "EP" before the meeting was adjourned. Worse still, they didn't know—couldn't know—that when they were overheard speaking of EP, it sounded to the casual observer as if they were discussing, with hushed tones, an embarrassing medical condition.

2. It plays like a shell game

When the preachers of Creationism got tired of getting laughed out of every courtroom in America, they did what we're doing; they dropped the -ism. Intelligent Design was the new PR slogan, and that too was roundly panned. But with one important difference: "creationism" had an ancient and venerable, albeit wholly misguided, philosophical pedigree. They could claim among their number no less a scientist than Isaac Newton. By contrast, "Intelligent Design" is cheap and tawdry; a sleazy rules-lawyer trick. Richard Dawkins' proposal to replace "atheists" with "Brights" was comparably silly. Creationism, atheism, and Epicureanism are perfectly serviceable words. To agitate for their replacement, rightly or wrongly, is to immediately put one's motives under suspicion.

3. It's a colorless abstraction

Now, there's nothing wrong with abstraction. Under certain circumstances it actually makes sense to speak in those terms. "Epicurean Philosophy", like "concussion protocol" or "Jeffersonian democracy", is a fitting term to use in an academic sense. One could write a book

about "Epicurean Philosophy". One could teach a course, or chair a panel on "Epicurean Philosophy" at a Classical Antiquities conference.

But that just isn't my relationship with the school of Epicurus! I do study Epicurean Philosophy, but that is secondary to my main interest; I am a follower of Epicureanism. We can talk about ideology and labels, but I don't see this as a weakness. I have vetted this school, approved it, found it worthy above every comparable human effort; like Lucretius—like Diogenes of Oenoanda—I have nailed my colors to the mast. On some deeper-than-intellectual level, it pleases me to think of some continuity between myself and the numberless ancient Epicureans whose dust lies scattered in forgotten tombs.

Well, that went on rather long! I am aware of holding the minority view on the question, and I don't mean to convey the impression that I am bothered by the group preference. I certainly have no intention of forcing the point! But the argument as compiled by Nate has persisted for at least five years, and it may be of service to have this response on hand. It might aid in understanding some of the resistance, at least.