

Dead Reddit / The "Isms" Thread

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On "-Isms" and Pleasure Wisdom

"Epicureanism" vs. "Epicurean Philosophy"

The *Society of Friends of Epicurus* has dedicated extensive dialogue to the suffix **"-ism"**. In the Epicurean spirit of **παρρησία** (or **"parrhēsīā"**) meaning **"frank speech" or "speaking candidly"**, it is important to recognize that the ancient Greek language does not employ the **"-ism"** when referring to the philosophy of Epicurus; thus, while the word **can** be functionally employed for practical purposes, **"Epicureanism"** may **NOT be appropriate word to invoke when referring to the philosophy of Epicurus. "Epicureanism" does not quite capture the nuance of Epicurean Philosophy.**

-ISMs

The English suffix, **"-ism"** — according to BOTH common and academic usages — is employed to designate a distinctive "doctrine", "theory", "attitude", "belief", "practice", "process", "state", "condition", "religion", "system", or "philosophy". According to this definition, it is NOT incorrect to add a simple **"-ism"** at the end of **"the philosophy of Epicurus"**, as it should, appropriately and accurately, render the word **"Epicureanism" (or even "Epicurism")**.

In more succinct terms, we can visualize **"Epicurean-ism" simply as "Epicurean-philosophy"**.

While this works for practical purposes, it *may* lead to several misconceptions:

[1] Bracketing the suffix **"-ism"** to a name often indicates devotional worship of a historical figure (*consider the differences between the old, misleading usage of "Mohammedanism" versus the preferred, contemporary usage of "Islam"*). Epicureans do NOT worship Epicurus as a supernatural prophet, NOR as a manifestation of a transcendental ideal.

[2] In the modern era, **"-ism"** is frequently used to identify political typologies. Terms like **"Monarchism"**, **"Liberalism"**, **"Conservatism"**, **"Communism"** and **"Fascism"** express ideological systems that — *contrary to Epicurean philosophy* — presuppose the existence of an ideal state or *utopia*, organized according to the dimensions of a perfect, timeless principle.

[3] The suffix "-ισμός" (or "-ismós") was rarely employed in ancient Greek; few examples of "-ism" (or "-ismós") exist prior to the linguistic conventions of the modern period. In giving preference to the term "*Epicurean philosophy*", we acknowledge the importance of privileging ancient Greek historical sources as opposed to relying upon Latin translations.

-ISMVS

Our tradition of adding "-ism" to the end of words — in which we express distinctive "*ideologies*" — begins in the post-Classical period, corresponding to the *Renaissance*. Coming from the Latin "re-" (meaning "*again*") and "*nasci*" (meaning "*to be born*"), the Renaissance, or cultural "*rebirth*" resurrected the innovations of Antiquity. This revival adapted translations through the Latin language, using the Roman alphabet, *sheathing ancient Greek observations*. Liberally, scholars began to apply the suffix "-ismus" — as we would recognize it today — during this period of *New Latin*.

(I'm going to call the tradition — in which modern English-speakers partake — the "Ism-ism", or, in other words, "the systemic practice of adding '-ism' to idea-expressing words". Due to the profound influence of Latin, and the linguistic conventions of the modern era, we ALL — in one way or another — have become dedicated Ismists.)

From the perspective of the contemporary world, the suffix -ISMVS or "-ismus" was first borrowed from the *Old Latin* language of the Romans, and later appropriated by post-Classical peoples as *New Latin* and *Contemporary Latin*. We find an abundance of "-ism" and "-ismus" in both *Romance* and *Germanic* language families. As in *Latin*, the "-ism" indicates distinctive "doctrines", "theories", "attitudes", "beliefs", "religions", "systems", and "philosophies".

Here, *however*, is where we note a difference that our Mediterranean friends have often observed: while the Greek language — like Celtic, Indic, and other Indo-European languages — has evolved from a common root, it did NOT adopt Latin conventions the same way that *Romance* and *Germanic* languages have. *Ancient Greek* philosophers, especially Epicurus, would not have thought of "*philosophies*" as "*-isms*".

-ize | -ίζω | -ίζō |

We receive the Latin -ISMVS or "-ismus" from the ancient Greek "-ισμός" ("-ismós"), which, *itself*, is a bracketing of two *other* ancient Greek words, those words being "-ίζω" ("-ízō") and "-μός" ("-mós"). *We'll start with the former word*. The suffix "-ίζω" ("-ízō") was added to *nouns* to form *new verbs*. Let's look at (x3) examples:

[1] *canonize* | κανονίζω | kanonízō

κανών or “*kanōn*” literally referred to a “reed”, and carried the connotation of a “measuring rod” or “standard”

+ “-ίζω” (“-*ízō* or “-*ize*”) rendered “κανονίζω”, “*kanonízō*” or “*canonize*” meaning “to make *standard*”.

[2] *Hellenize* | ἑλληνίζω | *Hellēnízō*

ἑλλην or “*Héllēn*” literally referred to that which is “Greek”.

+ “-ίζω” (“-*ízō* or “-*ize*”) rendered “ἑλληνίζω”, “*Hellēnízō*”, or “*Hellenize*” meaning “to make *Greek*”.

[3] *synchronize* | συγχρονίζω | *súnkhronosízō*

σύγχρονος or “*súnkhronos*” literally referred to “synchronous”

+ “-ίζω” (“-*ízō* or “-*ize*”) rendered “συγχρονίζω”, “*súnkhronosízō*”, or “*synchronize*” meaning “to *sync*”.

The key point with “-ίζω” (“-*ízō*”) — and our Modern English suffix “-ize” — is that we can turn any *concept* into a *verb*, or, in more philosophically interesting terms, we can **ACTIVATE** it.

-μός | -*mós*

The second suffix from which the *ancient Greek* “-ισμός” (“-*ismós*”) was bracketed is “-μός” (“-*mós*”). Contrary to the convention of **ACTIVATING** a word that *represents a concept*, adding “-μός” (“-*mós*”) **ABSTRACTS** an *action*. We can demonstrate this convention through (x3) other examples that translate well into Modern English:

[1] *cataclysm* | κατακλυσμός | *kataklysmós*

κατακλύζω (*kataklyúzō*) - literally meant “to wash away”.

+ “-μός” (“-*mós*”) rendered “κατακλυσμός”, “*kataklysmós*” or “*cataclysm*”, meaning a “*great flood*”.

[2] *sarcasm* | σαρκασμός | *sarkasmós*

“σαρκάζω” or “*sarkázō*” literally, and figuratively meant “tearing apart” or “to tear off the flesh”.

+ “-μός” (“-*mós*”) rendered “σαρκασμός”, “*sarkasmós*” or “*sarcasm*”, meaning “(*figuratively*) tearing apart”.

[3] *syllogism* | συλλογισμός | *sullogismós*

συλλογίζομαι (*sullogízomai*) literally meant “to compute” or “to infer”.

+ "-μός" ("-mós") rendered "συλλογισμός", "sarkasmós", or "syllogism", meaning an "inference".

The key point with "-μός" ("-mós") is that the ancient Greeks could turn any *verb* into a word that expressed an *abstract concept*, or, in more philosophically interesting terms, it could *systematize activity into an idea*.

-ism | -ισμός | -ismós

The re-bracketing of the suffix "-μός" ("-mós") appended with "-ίζω" ("-ízō") presents us with "-ισμός" ("-ismós") or the suffix "-ism", a convention which *systematizes a verb that has been activated from a noun*. Very few examples exist in ancient Greek. A suitable example for English mono-linguists can be demonstrated in the word "*Sabbath*":

[1] σάββατον | *sábbaton* literally means "the Sabbath" (borrowed from the Hebrew שבת or "shabát")

+ "-ίζω" ("-ízō" or "-ize") σαββατίζω | *sabbatízō* means "to make, observe, or keep the Sabbath"

+ "-ισμός" ("-ismós") σαββατισμός | *sabbatismós* means "the state of making or keeping the Sabbath"

Unlike the ubiquitous "-ismus" of *Latin*, and the overused "-ism" of *Modern English*, the *ancient Greek* "-ismos" is almost NEVER used. The ancient Greeks did NOT share our zeal for *Ismism*. When faced with the need to express a NEW word with FRESH meaning, the ancient Greeks built words from *either* [1] the names of people and objects they directly knew or observed, and [2] active forces they felt or experienced, but NOT as [3] abstract systems.

So, why NOT "Epicureanism"?

The Epicurean path to wisdom recognizes that we EXPERIENCE NATURE DIRECTLY and NOT indirectly as *abstract systems*. *Epicurean philosophy* and the phenomena it observes — the sensation of an atomic reality, the feelings of pleasure and pain, and the anticipation of natural patterns — neither depends upon allegiance to a single leader, nor initiation into a secret society, nor longing for a golden age, nor adhering to institutional precepts, nor devotion to a holy ideal.

Christ's resurrection would not be known to the contemporary era without *the Gospels*.

Muhammad's revelation would not be known to the contemporary era without *the Qur'an*.

Even without the historical personage of Epicurus, humanity would still have sensed an atomic reality, felt pleasure and pain, and anticipated the patterns of nature. Humanity would *still* have documented the social changes throughout history, would still have seen the rise and fall of Empires and their ideologies. Humans would still have made choices with the intention of benefitting their lives in avoiding sickness and pursuing pleasure.

Without *Jesus of Nazareth*, Christians would not recite the *Lord's Prayer*.

Without *Muhammad*, Muslims would perform *Salah* to Mecca five times a day.

Without Epicurus, *however*, humanity would still have pursued pleasure. NATURE, *itself*, is so much LARGER, *more important*, and more fundamental than any one historical personage, *including Epicurus*. Vocabulary aside, the wise person would still have engaged the natural world, and pursued pleasure to its fullest.

"*Epicureanism*" (or, also, "*Epicurism*") carries a connotation - albeit *very slightly* - that our path to wisdom is *just another* doctrinal institution that advertises immaterial truths from an untouchable dimension. It is not quite as accurate to categorize seekers of pleasure wisdom as "*Epicureanists*" who follow "*Epicureanism*" as it is to identify as "*Epicureans*" who study "*Epicurean philosophy*". Our endeavor rests within our own bodies; NATURE, *itself*, is the greatest teacher.

All that being said ...

... for practical purposes, there most certainly isn't anything inherently wrong about employing the term "*Epicureanism*". The "*Epicurean-*" part is unchanged, and the "*-ism*", *literally*, and *harmlessly*, identifies a "*philosophy*". In *Modern English*, this does correctly indicate our love of natural wisdom, apart from any oath to a mythic principle.

***Nonetheless*, the employment of "*Epicurean philosophy*" over "*Epicureanism*" serves to keep our anticipations FRESH, to indicate to others that our interactions are bigger than *disembodied souls paddling ideas back and forth in a court of Mind*, and to act as a reminder that the path to wisdom is not a map that has been given to us from an eternal place of perfection, but that we each carry a well-calibrated compass within ourselves to know the world and guide us to happiness.**

"DON'T call [*my belief system*] an *-ism*!"

While "*Epicurean philosophy*" may better reflect its own etymological origin (without the "*-ism*"), it should NOT indicate that the suffix "*-ism*" should be reserved as a derogation for non-Epicurean ideas, nor exclusively employed as a polemic toward idealism. Even *Epicurean philosophy, itself*, incorporates *atomism, hedonism, naturalism, and materialism*; most certainly, these "*-isms*" are NOT *idealistic*.

While *Epicurean philosophy* boasts a unique foundation upon *materialism* (and lambasts its opponents for *idealism*), it should also be noted that other ancient Greek schools — ALSO — did NOT employ the “-ism”. Members of Plato's *Academy* were “Academics”; members of Aristotle's *Lyceum* with “Peripatetics”; members of Zeno's *Stoa* were “Stoics”. It was only later that scholars began to employ the terms “*Platonism*”, “*Aristotelianism*”, and “*Stoicism*”.

Furthermore, this same acknowledgment applies to religious traditions:

The earliest rendering of the religion we refer to as Judaism was יהודה or “Yahadút”, from the Hebrew word יהודי “y'hudá” meaning “the Jewish people” and the suffix יהו- (“-ót) meaning “the tradition of”. The *ismed word that we employ* — Judaism — is first found in Maccabees 2 in the *Koine Greek* language by Hellenistic Jews, written around 124 BCE (over a thousand years after the foundation of Hebrew monotheism), rendered as ιουδαισμός (“Ioudaismós”).

“Zoroastrianism” is first attested from 1854 as an anglicization of the ancient Greek Ζωροάστρης “Zōroástrēs” (or “Zoroaster”) borrowed from the original Avestan word 𐬰𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀 or “Zarathustra”. Ancient Iranians referred to their *religion as* 𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀 translating to “worship of Mazda” (sometimes romanized as “Mazdaism”) in which 𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬀 or “Mazda” both expresses the name of the Iranian Creator deity, *and also*, a word for “wisdom”.

The *ising* of the religion of post-Classical Arabs has been identified in the contemporary era as being inadequate and largely offensive to the populations who practice it. Until the 20th century, the monotheistic religion of ٱلْإِسْلَام or “al-Islām” was identified by Europeans as “*Mohammedanism*” (or “*Muhammadanism*”), inappropriately implying that the prophet *Muhammad* was divine *himself*, in the same way that *Christians* think of *Jesus of Nazareth* as *divine*.

People from the Punjab region of India refer to their religious tradition as 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 Sikhī”, anglicized to the English-speaking world as “Sikhism”. The word comes from a Sanskrit root 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 śikṣā” meaning “to learn” or “to study” (this recognition of the practitioner as a “*student*” is also found in the *Confucian* tradition).

The same is true of *Hinduism*, an anglicization of the Sanskrit 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 Saṅātana Dharma " meaning “*Eternal Order*”. In fact, the word “*Hindu*” itself was used by non-Indians to refer to *people living around the Indus river*. Ancient Indo-Iranian populations would have referred to themselves as 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 ‘Arya” (from which we get the term “*Aryan*”).

“*Jainism*” is first attested from 1858 as an anglicization of the Sanskrit adjective 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 Jaina”, which comes from the Sanskrit name for the 6th century >em class=”western”> tradition 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 “Jina”. The word “Jina” is related to the verb 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 meaning “to conquer” similar to 𑀲𑀸𑀓𑀾𑀢𑀺 jaya” meaning “victory”. “Jain” literally means “

Pleasure Wisdom

Whether we employ the term “Epicureanism”, or the sometimes-preferred “Epicurean philosophy”, the distinguishing feature of Epicurus' wisdom is his insistence that pleasure is the supreme goal of life, that this is a tangible happiness, free from physical pain and emotional anguish, grounded in a knowable reality, formed from particles, sensible to living beings, who feel their way to pleasure, and anticipate the consequences of their choices. No cosmic principle precedes, or supersedes the universe, nor was the universe divined for any purpose greater than the satisfaction of the subjects who enjoy it. The wisdom of pleasure was NOT invented by any one prophet, nor divinely revealed to illuminate humanity; simply, Epicurus was one of many insightful friends who observed this reality, and shared in the wisdom of pleasure.

Cheers, friends!

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