

Episode One Hundred Forty-Five - Part 01 (Chapter 1 of Epicurus And His Philosophy)

Post by “Cassius” of October 16, 2022 at 8:17 PM

Welcome to Episode One Hundred Forty-Five of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

Each week we'll walk you through the ancient Epicurean texts, and we'll discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

This week we will start a series of podcasts intended to provide a general introductory overview to Epicurean philosophy. For organization purposes we will use the topic structure employed by Norman DeWitt in his "Epicurus and His Philosophy," but we will not bind ourselves to the text.

For the first episode we will begin in Chapter One.

- **The Historical Background of Epicurean Philosophy**

- It is important to emphasize that at one and the same time Epicurus was both the most revered and most reviled of all founders of Greco-Roman philosophical schools.
- For seven hundred years Epicurus was very popular throughout the Greco-Roman world. His images were displayed, his handbooks memorized and carried by students, and on the twentieth of every month his followers assembled in his name.
- Throughout the same period Epicurus' enemies ceaselessly reviled him, and he was attacked by Platonists, Stoics, and Christians, and his name was an abomination to the Jews.
- Therefore much of what has been written about Epicurus in both the ancient and modern world is wrong.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/51668272>

Post by “Joshua” of October 22, 2022 at 10:42 PM

thoreauspyglass.jpg known

Henry David Thoreau's spyglass, Concord Museum.

Thoreau on the Synoptic View--literally, things "Seen together" in their proper relation.

Many a man, when I tell him that I have been on to a mountain, asks if I took a glass with me. No doubt, I could have seen further with a glass, and particular objects more distinctly—could have counted more meeting-houses; but this has nothing to do with the peculiar beauty and grandeur of the view which an elevated position affords. It was not to see a few particular objects, as if they were near at hand, as I had been accustomed to see them, that I ascended the mountain, but to see an infinite variety far and near in their relation to each other, thus reduced to a single picture. The facts of science, in comparison

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A Margin of Leisure *Age 35*

with poetry, are wont to be as vulgar as looking from the mountain with a telescope. It is a counting of meeting-houses.¹

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2022 at 8:56 AM

Norman DeWitt's biography in the Rutger's Database of Classical Scholars:

[DEWITT, Norman Wentworth](#)

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2710-episode-one-hundred-forty-five-part-01-chapter-1-of-epicurus-and-his-philosophy/>

All Scholars

DEWITT, Norman Wentworth



Date of Birth: September 18, 1876

Born City: Tweedside

Born State/Country: ON

Parents: Hiram & Margaret Conland D.

Date of Death: September 20, 1958

Death City: Lincoln

Death State/Country: IL

Married: Katherine Ida Johnston, 26 Sept. 1906.

Education:

B.A. Victoria College, U. Toronto, 1899; Ph.D. U. Chicago, 1906; additional study at Jena & ASCSR.

Dissertation:

"The Dido Episode in *the Aeneid* of Virgil" (Chicago, 1907); printed (Toronto, 1907).

Professional Experience:

Prof. class. Lincoln Coll. (Lincoln, IL), 1904-5; instr. class. Washington U. (St. Louis), 1905-7; prof. class. Miami (Oxford, OH), 1907-8; prof. Lat. Victoria Coll., U. Toronto, 1908-45; dean arts Victoria Coll., U. Toronto, 1924-8; actng. prof. Cornell, 1928-9; corr. fell. Royal Acad. Mantua; fell. Royal Soc. Can., 1925; pres. CAMWS, 1938-9; pres. APA, 1946-7.

Post by "Don" of October 23, 2022 at 9:45 AM

[Google Scholar](#)

Citations and links to some of DeWitt's papers

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2022 at 11:51 AM

Thanks for that Link. I need to explore what an "OpenAthens" account entails.

In the meantime here is one of his most significant articles, that serves as sort of a precursor to the book itself:

File

[Norman DeWitt - Philosophy For The Millions \(1947\)](#)



Norman DeWitt's 1947 article summarizing the significance of Epicurus and his philosophy.



Cassius

July 11, 2022 at 12:04 PM

Post by "Cassius" of October 24, 2022 at 5:39 AM

We're starting a new series in the "Lucretius Today" podcast. We'll be going through Norman DeWitt's Book "Epicurus and His Philosophy" and working to provide a basic overview of the philosophy from the ground up. Our first installment - Episode 145 - The Philosophy of Epicurus - Part 1 - Chapter 1 of "Epicurus And His Philosophy" is now available:

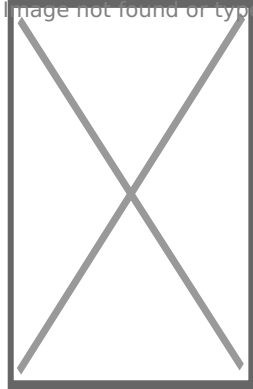
<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/51668272>

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2710-episode-one-hundred-forty-five-part-01-chapter-1-of-epicurus-and-his-philosophy/>

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2022 at 8:20 AM

A full preview of the entirety of chapter one of Epicurus and His Philosophy is available at Google Books here:

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[Epicurus and His Philosophy](#)

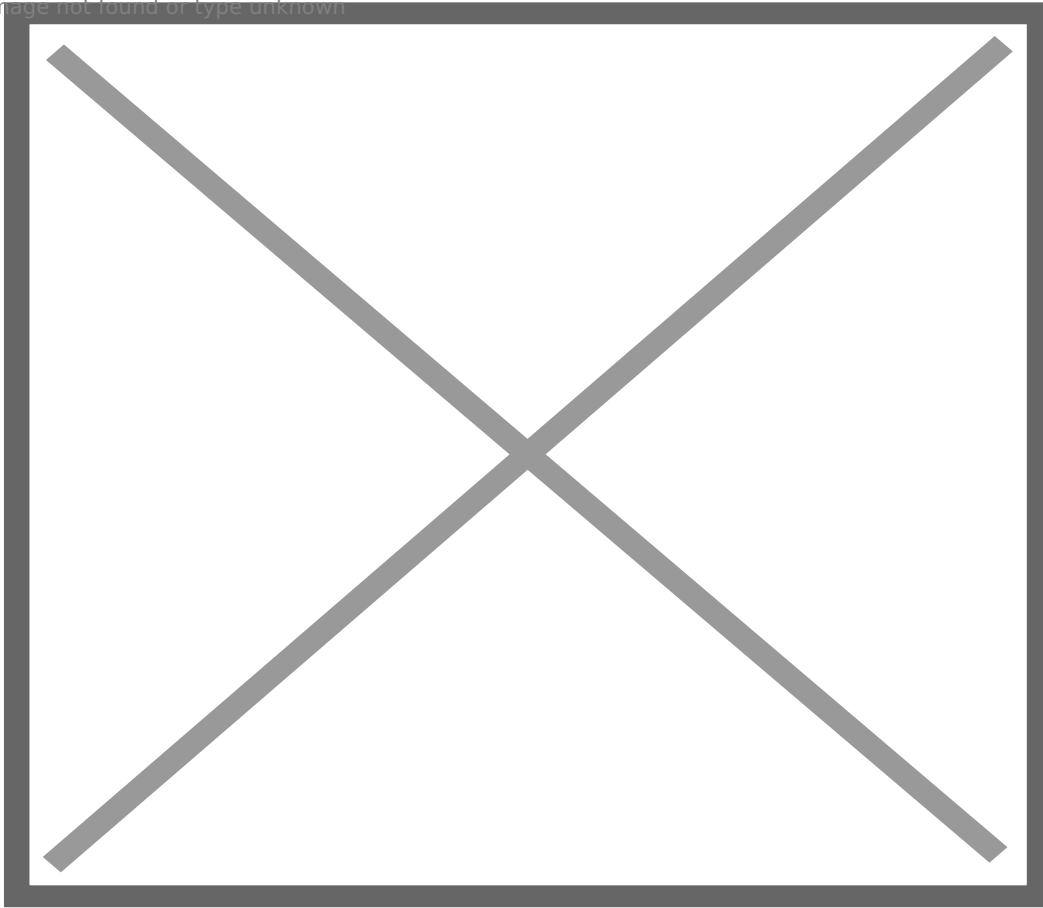
books.google.com

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2022 at 8:22 AM

We also have a page dedicated to the book here:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2710-episode-one-hundred-forty-five-part-01-chapter-1-of-epicurus-and-his-philosophy/>

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[DeWitt \(Norman\) - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" - Epicureanfriends.com](#)

ADMIN EDIT: Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy" is available in PDF and EPUB format at various places around the internet, and is also available in...
www.epicureanfriends.com

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 24, 2022 at 9:51 AM

Cassius, at about 56:50, you say "There's nothing to fear about the absence of a supernatural god" -- which is a very interesting idea. Because I don't think it is said that way in Epicurean writings. If I remember correctly, it more about not fearing the gods (not fearing their wrath or punishment).

But I am glad you brought up this slightly different twist, because I think this type of fear which you mention is very valid. And I think that now in our current times there are many Christians that might feel too much fear at the thought that "God isn't protecting them from harm". The idea that God is not supernatural would be very disturbing (and very distasteful). So Christians

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may feel very disturbed by the Epicurean philosophical belief regarding the nature of god.

Post by “Don” of October 24, 2022 at 10:46 AM

Thread

[Thoughts and Criticism of Chapter 1](#)

This is my second reading through DeWitt, but, admittedly, the first was several years ago and I did not have a firm recollection. I'm currently through Chapter 2 on this reading.

It is valuable that DeWitt has undertaken a comprehensive look at Epicureanism, both in synopsis and in detail. Additionally, his scholarship is obviously deep, and [he taught in a number of schools in North America](#). I also find it interesting that he uses the terms *Epicureanism* and *Epicurean philosophy* somewhat...



Don

April 13, 2020 at 1:09 AM

Blast from the past (2020) and my initial takes on chapter 1

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2022 at 12:11 PM

I was listening to the final product and caught Kalosyni's comment to the effect that a simple "atheist" perspective is not nearly sufficient as a full worldview. That's an important benefit that Epicurus can bring to people who know enough to reject supernatural religion, but who don't know where to go from there and think that Western philosophy offers them nothing. That's something that Nietzsche pointed out - that until Christianity took over (like bad money drives out good), many of the greatest minds of Greece and Rome were Epicurean.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 24, 2022 at 7:18 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Kalosyni's comment to the effect that a simple "atheist" perspective is not nearly sufficient as a full worldview. That's an important benefit that Epicurus can bring to people who know enough to reject supernatural religion, but who don't know where to go from there and think that Western philosophy offers them nothing.

I attended an atheist weekly "meetup" just a few times (before Covid hit) and it was mainly just socializing (but awkwardly) and drinking beer since the group met at a pub. Their activism was to have a banner hung in downtown Eugene at Christmastime, in competition with the Christians who hung up something like "Jesus is the reason for the season". The atheist banner was "Celebrate the Solstice" (if I remember correctly). It seemed that science and technology were common topics (not too much time actually talking about atheism).

At the very end of this podcast I said something about Epicureanism being halfway between atheism and agnosticism, but I don't think that is really correct. It really is very different, and I think we need to keep talking about it until we get a better idea of the religious environment that Epicurus lived in (festivals were part of the social fabric of Greece), as compared to our current times of monotheism (our US money still says "In God We Trust"). We may be more free in some ways and less free in other ways. We hold a similar place as atheists, and yet we stand up for things (rather than just being anti-religious). In Epicureanism there are life-enhancing ideas worth sharing with others.

Post by "Don" of October 24, 2022 at 9:19 PM

I have to give a shout out to [Joshua](#)'s Tolkien reference in his final comments   

Post by "Godfrey" of October 24, 2022 at 10:55 PM

Haven't listened to the podcast yet but I just finished binge watching The Rings of Power. I enjoyed it immensely even though I'm not a serious Tolkien fan: particularly enjoyed all of the design work that went into it. And I kept thinking of the Tolkien fans here!

Post by “Don” of October 24, 2022 at 11:08 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Haven't listened to the podcast yet but I just finished binge watching The Rings of Power. I enjoyed it immensely even though I'm not a serious Tolkien fan: particularly enjoyed all of the design work that went into it. And I kept thinking of the Tolkien fans here!

I certainly won't hijack this thread, but just wanted to say, in response to [Godfrey](#), that I, too, have watched the first season of Rings of Power and, let's say.... I have... thoughts. 🤔

If anyone wants to start a private conversation, I'd be happy to share my pains and pleasures watching the show 😊 & would be curious to read others'.

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2022 at 7:11 PM

Thank you for outlining that Kalosyni!

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 30, 2022 at 8:12 PM

[Notes from Episode 145 - The Philosophy of Epicurus by Norman DeWitt -- Chapter 1 -- the Synoptic View of Epicureanism \(Part 1\)](#)

(Revised version 10/30/22)

0:30 -- This podcast is an attempt to provide a more general perspective for the generalist listener/reader who does not have a lot of background, and this will be based on the organizational plan used by DeWitt.

2:12 -- The book preface states DeWitt's purpose of writing this book:

1. To organize surviving data into a biographical sketch of Epicurus to show throw some light on the growth of his personality and the development of his philosophy.

2. To give a new interpretation based on less amended, less revised remains of Epicurus' writings.

3. To bring attention to Epicureanism as a bridge of transition from classical philosophies of Greece to the Christian religion. (which is not part of the goal of this podcast).

4:40 -- Epicurus as the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in Greco-Roman world.

5:24 -- Most revered and how Epicureanism spread and flourished

6:27 -- Epicurus differed significantly from Plato as to his ideal forms, and Epicurus comes along and brings up a much different approach philosophy, and interest in Epicureanism spread to all corners of the known world.

8:05 -- He was reviled -- Jewish scholars applied the word "epikoros" (heretic).

10:45 - Now online you can read things about Epicureanism and the uncontroversial goal of how best to live happily -- so it seems Epicurus should be held in high regard. Why would there be any problem at all?

11:28 - Stoics, Christians, and Orthodox Jews, and others saw something deeper and more threatening in the Epicurean rejection of Platonism, the rejection of idealism of forms, and the rejection of a supernatural creator that started the universe in motion and providentially attends to it, as well as the shift from absolute morality to contextual morality. So Epicureanism contains explosively divisive ideas then (and now) and could get you exiled from your community.

14:05 - Epicurean philosophy actually constitutes a complete restructuring of the mental framework of how we should think about the most fundamental things -- everything from nature itself, to human societies, to the nature of the gods -- this is a radical reformation of thought at the time, and it's mostly because of that that we have this interesting dichotomy between the people who love what he is doing, like Lucian, and the people who hate him as much as they hate anything (that would be Alexander in this case).

15:02 -- A reform movement -- Epicurus realized what he was doing and was writing letters, articles and books -- writing against other philosophers and as a campaigner for his own views. So there was this missionary/evangelization aspect and a number Epicureans were engaged in spreading their views and being pamphleteers -- engaging in spreading their message to correct improper beliefs about supernatural gods, incorrect views about life after death, and expressing new views about how to live life as a whole.

16:45 -- A Synoptic View of Epicureanism -- using the analogy of Henry David Thoreau's looking glass story as a clear way of expressing what a synoptic view is -- seeing things together and seeing them in their proper relations to one another.

19:00 -- This way of seeing things is important to Epicurus and we see this in the Letter to Herodotus, that we should use outlines so that we can know what the important points are and understand how things fit together.

20:15 -- DeWitt is supplying a broad outline, and over time will add things in to fill in the details. This is similar to building a robot -- starting out with a skeleton and then add things on top of it. You can't see the forest if you stand six inches from a tree -- so we will start out with looking at the big picture, and then add in more details around what the important points are. We will attempt to provide an overall general perspective on Epicurus.

23:35 -- DeWitt says it is important to establish an attitude toward a particular subject. For example: The correct attitude to be taken with regard to the gods, how they are not to be feared, and the reason why not to fear them -- if a disciple could maintain this attitude it was felt that he would be rightly disposed to receive subsequent instruction about the nature of the gods.

25:53 -- So the attitude you take at the outset is going to color the way that you (or readers) interpret the subject matter. You can notice if a particular writer is hostile or not Epicureanism.

27:27 -- Something about pleasure -- Epicurus is tagged with immediate pleasure. There is much less coverage of Greek philosophy in schools and often a younger person knows nothing of Epicurus.

28:20 -- The people who do somehow look up about Epicurus on the Wikipedia page will end up reading that Epicurus and his followers were known for eating simple meals and discussing a wide range of philosophical subjects, and the goal of philosophy was to attain ataraxia and aponia, and live in tranquility and self-sufficiency surrounded by friends. All of this was obvious and inoffensive. Who doesn't want happiness and freedom from the fear of death, and it seems like those are such general goals, unbelievable that anybody would ever have anything to say against Epicurus.

29:25 -- Development of the philosophy went beyond the set of philosophies that were taught at that time. It went beyond beliefs of supernatural gods who intervened and beyond fate and a deterministic aspect of life in which you were fated to have a particular result or the gods would intervene, as if all these assertions were true. And Epicurus was examining the foundations of these philosophies.

31:53 -- It matters where you start -- that the first step is going to make a difference. On the EpicureanFriends forum, this book has been recommended for a very long time.

33:00 -- Otherwise we might jump in at the same place that Wikipedia jumps in: the goal of life is pleasure, the highest pleasure is absence of pain -- and this would be in isolation with the rest of the philosophy.

33:40 -- Even today the commentary that we read about Epicurus is largely written by people who do not agree with some of the major aspects of Epicurus' philosophy, especially the morality, because they say that we have to pursue the good (virtue) as the ultimate goal. But we don't really know what it means to pursue the good. We don't know what the good (virtue, or the will of god) is because these are generalities that are not a given -- that have no meaning or have no ability of being defined in the real world, through the evidence of the senses and the logical approaches that Epicurus was pursuing.

34:50 -- Epicurus becomes the best guide of going back to nature for the answers - not nature as created by a supernatural god or nature with ideas floating around (ideas about virtue that existed from the beginning of time). So it is important to understand the revolutionary nature of Epicurus' philosophy.

35:30 -- Chain arguments, deductive reasoning, if this then that - general to the particular. (observation, evidence, observation). Canonics - test of truth -five senses, anticipations and the feelings as the basis of everying. Observation by the eyes doesn't tell you what it is you are observing.

37:20 -- DeWitt -- [all sensations are true](#) or not -- various meanings to [all sensations are true](#). Epicurus never declared sensations to be only source of knowledge. Our interpretations of sensations are not necessarily trustworthy. So like a witness testifying in a case - all sensations are reported honestly but because of distortions may not be the clearest view and take further observations before you come to a conclusion about what actually is true - weighing the evidence is a different process than gathering the evidence.

41:35 -- Philodemous talks about Epicureans in his time taking the synoptic view as good enough and just moving on. and not filling in the details. We need to take the whole thing in view and have a necessary education in the broader context, and then continue to study deeper.

43:20 -- Epicurus did a broad study of nature, but also the study of human nature. And it is important to understand your own thought processes and your own sensations, your own sense organs -- in order to use them successfully -- and also the way our mind operates.

45:40 -- DeWitt has attempted to provide almost a textbook of basic positions of Epicurus - perspective, structure, and sweeping background.

46:06 -- This philosophy is meant to be helpful on life decisions. Vain is the philosophy which does not provide for the health of the soul

49:08 -- Practical use of Epicurean philosophy that is useful for regular people.

50:02 -- Largely accurate, but Cicero and others were writing to refute Epicurus.

51:45-- Synoptic view is no substitute for the details -- but details are no substitute for the outlines. You need a foundation of course, but must take the final step to apply and impliment

what you are studying -- the map is not the territory.

54:25 -- general assessment of your life and happiness, taking in an overview -- higher viewpoint understanding your place in nature and come to a feeling of tranquility and calmness.

Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2022 at 8:58 PM

Wednesday Zoom Comments:

On the issue of what book to read first, Onenski comments that A Few Days In Athens has strengths as a first book to read because it is approachable. Given that the ethics is what interests lots of people, AFDIA sort of takes that approach.

Onenski also says that in his case he first read Hiram's book as a general introduction. He would still recommend it to some audiences; today he might also recommend.

Kochie says that he has seen some Catherine Wilson videos and that he books might be a good place to start. He himself however likes the Epicurus Reader, and he likes the introduction to that which is also on the Epicurism.info website.

This is an issue I haven't thought about in a while but it's an important question - What do we tell our friends is a good book to start with if they want to know more at a very general level?