

Who to believe?

Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 27, 2023 at 10:32 AM

Is it right that there is no writings directly from Epicurus left?

The problem I'm having reading around the forum is that everyone seems to have their own interpretation of what Epicureans should be. I understand this is going to happen but reading between the lines people seem to hold quite different views. Some people quite into physical pleasure for its own sake calling themselves cyreaniacs (or something like that). This doesn't seem to fit with the Epicurean view at all and I'm finding it quite confusing and almost contradictory and rather go back to the source if possible.

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2023 at 10:36 AM

TC - You are right to want to read the original materials, and right that there is much disagreement.

The biography by Diogenes Laertius contains three letters by Epicurus himself, and there are fragments that seem reliable but no way to be sure.

This is a continuing source of confusion that is not going away. Most everyone has exactly the same question, and if they don't, they aren't paying attention.

This should be a great thread to get lots of different views from those of us who have been through this before.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 27, 2023 at 11:47 AM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

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but reading between the lines people seem to hold quite different views. Some people quite into physical pleasure for its own sake calling themselves cyreaniacs (or something like that). This doesn't seem to fit with the Epicurean view at all and I'm finding it quite confusing and almost contradictory and rather go back to the source if possible.

The way that I take it is to always return to the extant writings and to contemplate them. Then you must work to apply them to your own life. For one person a very sensual pleasure may end up bring too much pain, as compared to another person - some people choose not to drink any alcohol where as others are able to choose to drink in such a way that it doesn't cause them future pains (they drink to enjoy the taste and not to "medicate" into drunkenness, although there may be a time a place for a slight drunkenness if one is able to still hold onto free choice while intoxicated, and wisely making sure not to drive a vehicle while drunk).

So we don't categorize things as "right" or "wrong" -

Principal Doctrine 8:

"No pleasure is bad in itself; but the means of paying for some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves." So it is a case by case situation that only you can decide for yourself.

I just created this graphic which may help:

The Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure:

We fill up the vessel of our experience with pleasure in a manner in which it simultaneously removes the pain. And when the vessel is full then no more pleasure can be fit in.



We choose pleasures which neither pain the body nor trouble the soul - for the health of the body and confidence within the mind.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 27, 2023 at 12:17 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

Some people quite into physical pleasure for its own sake calling themselves cyreniacs (or something like that).

Pleasure for its own sake is the goal given to us by nature which we observe in babies, animals, and as adult humans we redeem pleasure from the false belief that it is somehow "wrong".

As for the ancient Cyrenaics, they didn't take the relief from pain as a pleasure, nor the pleasure of mental pleasures, so they focused on "in the now" and stimulating pleasures -- and this is very different than the Epicurean understanding of pleasure. Perhaps if there are people on here saying they are "cyrenaic" then they are just trying to emphasize the sensual aspect of pleasure as being okay.

As we see that Diogenes Laertius says that Epicurus said:

"I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form."

So the Epicureans are totally fine with sensual pleasure, but as long as they also address the removal of any mental disturbances such as fear of death, fear of "irrational" punishment from the gods, or fear of pain (strong pain is short, and dull pains don't stop the enjoyment of pleasure).

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2023 at 12:23 PM

Also as to the Cyreniacs, Diogenes Laertius records:

Quote

He differs from the Cyrenaics with regard to pleasure. They do not include under the term the pleasure which is a state of rest, but only that which consists in motion. Epicurus admits both; also pleasure of mind as well as of body, as he states in his work On Choice and Avoidance and in that On the Ethical End, and in the first book of his work On Human Life and in the epistle to his philosopher friends in Mytilene.

So also Diogenes in the seventeenth book of his Epilecta, and Metrodorus in his Timocrates, whose actual words are: "Thus Pleasure being conceived both as that species which consists in motion and that which is a state of rest." The words of

Epicurus in his work *On Choice* are : “Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest; joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity.”

He further disagrees with the Cyrenaics in that they hold that pains of body are worse than mental pains; at all events evil-doers are made to suffer bodily punishment; whereas Epicurus holds the pains of the mind to be the worse; at any rate the flesh endures the storms of the present alone, the mind those of the past and future as well as the present. In this way also he holds mental pleasures to be greater than those of the body.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 27, 2023 at 12:32 PM

A proper understanding of Epicurus doesn't just fall off the page: it takes time, and work, but ultimately is very rewarding.

As noted, there isn't much remaining from Epicurus himself, and many of the ancient sources are hostile. As is much of the modern and contemporary scholarship.

My process began with reading as much I could find, often haphazardly, and trying to make sense of it. Then I discovered this forum; at that time writing and developing personal outlines of the philosophy was being emphasized. I found writing and getting feedback on an outline was very helpful, a bit intimidating, and just a beginning.

A key part of my process has been to try to put to use what I've read and to see if it is useful in my daily life. This has been very helpful, as it has allowed me to shed some unhelpful ideas while continuing to pursue those which I find fruitful.

Continuing with reading: modern, non-Epicurean authors such as Victor Stenger, Lisa Feldman Barrett and many others have proven to be quite relevant for me. Plus some (but not much, I find it painful!) reading of Plato and Aristotle has been really good for providing context. Even a book or two on the pre-Socratics has been quite interesting, to show the early development of Greek thought.

In short, for me at least, Epicurus has proven to be a gateway to all sorts of study and understanding. So much of his thinking is being built upon even today, mostly without acknowledgement. He wrote that he got great pleasure from the study of natural philosophy, and I'm finding something similar. The interesting thing is that so much divergent reading can lead to a better understanding of what Epicurus was saying so long ago.

The Stoics are famous for their "spiritual exercises"; this continuing study is an important Epicurean exercise. As is always testing what you read through your direct experience.

Hopefully this rambling post is of some relevance to your question [ThinkingCat](#) !

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2023 at 1:42 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Then I discovered this forum; at that time writing and developing personal outlines of the philosophy was being emphasized. I found writing and getting feedback on an outline was very helpful, a bit intimidating, and just a beginning.

We should begin to emphasis that again and keep at it!

Post by “Pacatus” of May 27, 2023 at 6:54 PM

Personally, I don't have any problem with the variety of interpretations – which I suspect is inescapable in any milieu that does not stifle critical thinking.

I would be much more concerned about any sharp-edged, cookie-cutter definition about what a “True Epicurean™” must be and do. But, then again, I would not be much concerned about whether or not my understanding/interpretation of Epicurus fit the contours of that cookie cutter. (Till the Inquisitors show up, anyway 😬😬 – but then, Epicurean philosophy, as I see it, is really not amenable to any Inquisition. 😊) But, then again – again – I don't mind being convinced that I am wrong, or at least would do well to rethink things (though I might be a bit stubborn along the way 😞).

After all, a hard rule-based (command-based, imperative-based) approach is more in line with Platonism / Stoicism / Kantianism – and strict creedalistic religions. I find an Epicurean outlook to be freeing from all that (and, in my case, has taken years to come to).

With all that said, there are certain lineaments of the philosophy that I think can be discerned (such as non-supernaturalism) – even as that discernment is advanced by continued study, and by dialectical discussion from multiple perspectives – as takes place on here every day. And, as my understanding has been thereby deepened (hopefully), I find myself more relaxed and at

ease about it all.

~ ~ ~

Note: Perhaps my favorite portrait of Epicurus is Frances Wright's fictional account in *A Few Days in Athens* – partly because of how she portrays him responding to issues like this one: robust reasoning, but always with graciousness and a kind of easy grace.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 27, 2023 at 6:57 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We should begin to emphasize that again and keep at it!

It is a very helpful exercise -- and perhaps one that is never truly finished (at least mine is unlikely to be 😊).

Post by “Don” of May 27, 2023 at 7:21 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

(Till the Inquisitors show up, anyway 😬 😊 – but then, Epicurean philosophy, as I see it, is really not amenable to any Inquisition. 😊)



NOBODY EXPECTS THE EPICUREAN INQUISITION!

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 27, 2023 at 10:32 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

Is it right that there is no writings directly from Epicurus left?

Not at all. Among those works that have survived are his *Epistles to Herodotus, Pythokles, Menoikeus, and Idomeneus*, in addition to his *Last Will*. We have a list *Key Doctrines* from a similarly named work, and two, preserved lists of *Sayings*. We have several hundred *fragments* from Epicurus' works, famously organized by Hermann Usener. In addition to those source materials, we have secondary sources from Epicurean opponents who cite Epicurus directly, or else, Epicureans, themselves, who reinforce the original positions of Epicurus. As Epicurus' school is renown for being doctrinally conservative, we find more historical consistency between ancient Epicureans than with their opponents.

Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 28, 2023 at 11:22 AM

Thanks everyone, A lot for me to think on and you are all bringing up some interesting points. I had an idea, if you were asked “what does it mean to you personally to be epicurean in 30 words or less?”, what would your response be?

Post by “Don” of May 28, 2023 at 12:42 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

I had an idea, if you were asked “what does it mean to you personally to be epicurean in 30 words or less?”, what would your response be?

I'll take that challenge 😊 and it was more difficult to keep to ≤ 30 words than I thought!

With pleasure as my North Star, I choose and reject paths leading onward. I am grateful for all my pleasurable memories, those I have now and those to come.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 28, 2023 at 1:59 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

“what does it mean to you personally to be epicurean in 30 words or less?”, what would your response be?

Pleasure, my natural goal: to remove pain and anxiety and experience the pleasures of sensation. With prudence overcoming the sorrows of life and experiencing sweetness. Smiling, being alive feels good!

(And...study and practice the philosophy with others of like mind).

Post by “Cassius” of May 28, 2023 at 2:05 PM

First thought:

Accepting Epicurus means that I have good reason for taking responsibility for my own life as well as the tools with which to do it.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 28, 2023 at 4:39 PM

A life of happy, harmonious well-being* and a pleasurable/pleasant life – in body and mind – are the same. Free from fear of gods or grave, I abide in simplicity and ease.

~ ~ ~

* My rendering of *eudaimonia*.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 29, 2023 at 12:10 AM

Life and the world suddenly make sense when freed from religious faith. This freedom allows the great pleasure of personal agency and responsibility.

Post by “Martin” of May 29, 2023 at 4:51 AM

I choose actions and avoidances such that my experience and scientific knowledge predict a high likelihood of sustainable maxed out pleasure which is worth the pain in preparations and consequences.

Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 29, 2023 at 6:28 AM

Wow, these responses are very inspiring, a treasure trove! I’m off to read dewitt!

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2023 at 8:40 AM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

Wow, these responses are very inspiring, a treasure trove! I’m off to read dewitt!

If you haven't read Dr. Emily Austin's book yet, I'd suggest that one as the first book. That is a very approachable introduction. DeWitt is a good introduction but he comes across as more academic even though he's writing for a popular audience. You can tell he's a professor writing in 1954.

Post by “TauPhi” of May 29, 2023 at 9:03 AM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

“what does it mean to you personally to be epicurean in 30 words or less?”

To be wise enough to know what I need and strong enough to avoid the rest. To live pleurably among people I love and be pleasant to live with.

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

Wow, these responses are very inspiring, a treasure trove! I'm off to read dewitt!

After introductory text like DeWitt's book I highly recommend going to the source material which [Eikadistes](#) listed above. This way you'll have general idea what's what and your own, unfiltered exposure to Epicurean texts. And if you find yourself liking all that, there's plenty more to enjoy later on. Have fun.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2023 at 9:17 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I highly recommend going to the source material which Nate listed above.

Agreed. An early read through the actual texts was my introduction after discovering Epicureanism through mentions in Stoic material (like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca) and in neo-Stoic materials. Also Alain De Botton's The Consolations of Philosophy. I don't recommend those, that's just where I heard about Epicurus.

For me, I moved directly into Diogenes Laertius 's book 10 devoted to Epicurus as my entry to the philosophy. Then Lucretius...etc. Let Epicurus and the Ancient Epicureans speak for themselves, then move into commentary.

That said, Emily Austin's book is the most accessible short introduction to the philosophy available now in my opinion.

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2023 at 9:23 AM

Also worth noting is that it is not hard to decide which approach works best for you. Read Chapter One of Dewitt and Chapter One of Austin and you will quickly determine which style best suits you personally.

Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 30, 2023 at 1:06 PM

[TauPhi](#) - I love all the responses to the 30 word question and there is no right answer, but I identify with yours the most. Thanks for sharing.

[Cassius](#) - that’s a good idea - I will do just that (read chapter one of both). Thanks

Post by “Cassius” of May 30, 2023 at 3:36 PM

When I get asked the question next time about "which book to read first" I am going to expand it further by including "A Few Days In Athens" in the list.

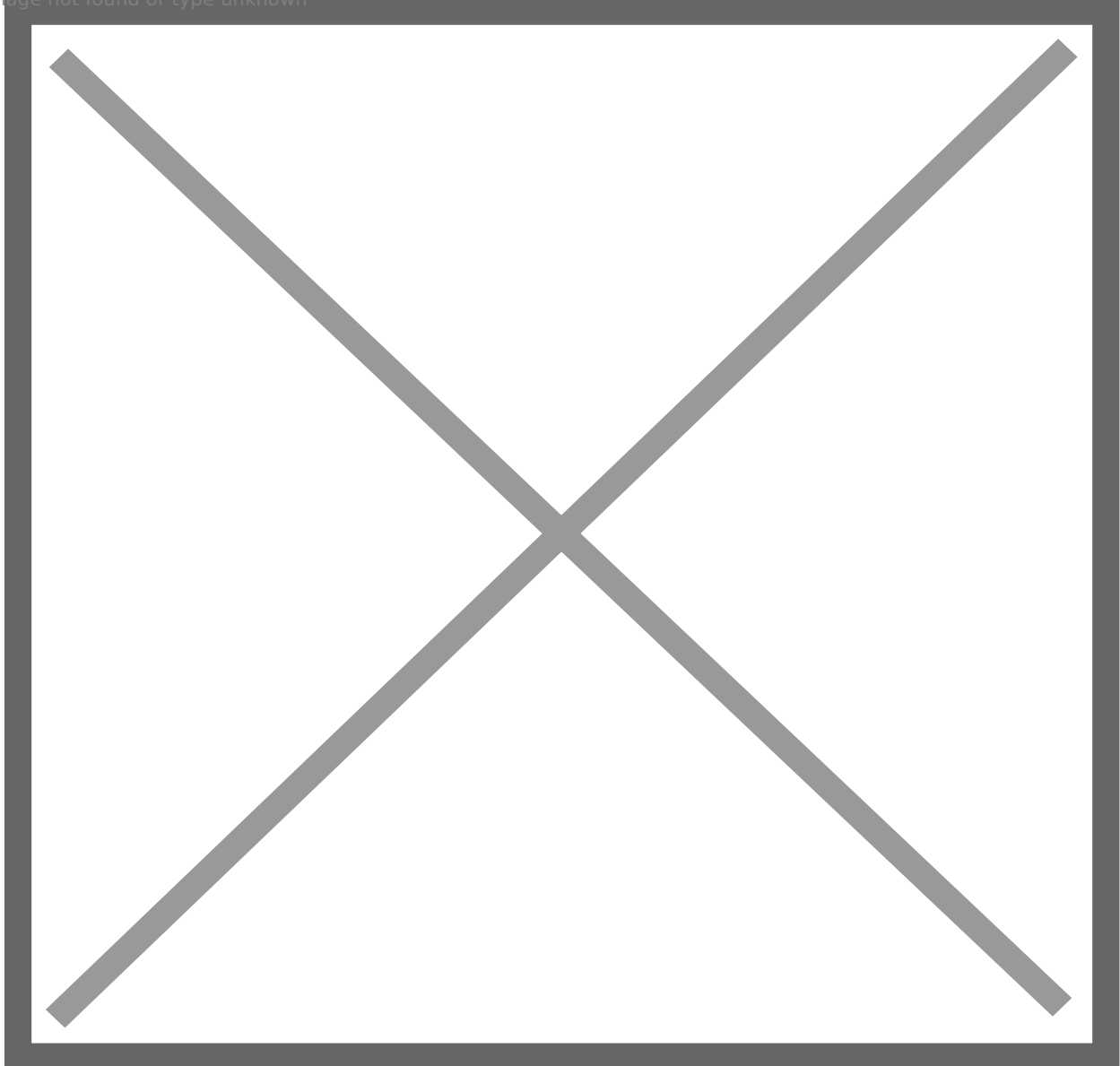
Unfortunately for AFDIA, chapter one is probably the least interesting of the whole book. However it does convey, in a 19th century "flowery" way, that what follows is an interesting fictional story, and sometimes people are in the mind to be told an action story rather than just reading non-fiction all the time. And what AFDIA has going for it is that after you get past the first chapter, it does pack in a lot of thought-provoking material about key issues about how Epicurus contrasts with Stoicism, so I think it's well worth reading and probably conveys a better sense of the "earnestness" of the ancient school and some of it's less-talked-about-but-still-important issues than a lot of people give it credit for.

It would be nice to expand the list further and say "read at least the first couple of pages of Lucretius" but I have yet to find many people who aren't thrown into confusion by the many translation and poetry and topic issues that are involved in getting started with it. Lucretius ends up being probably the most reliable of all sources on the full scope of the philosophy, but the hardest to take in on first reading.

Post by “TauPhi” of June 3, 2023 at 5:55 AM

On topic of which book to read first, I found this article by Gregory Sadler and I think it can be very beneficial for anyone looking for Epicurean reading list to start their study of the philosophy. Mr Sadler not only gives comprehensive list of ancient texts but also explains what these texts contain in regard to Epicurean philosophy.

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[Epicureanism Reading Recommendations](#)

what books and authors are key for studying this classical philosophical school?
medium.com

Post by “Cassius” of June 3, 2023 at 6:56 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3092-who-to-believe/>

I was just about ready to post a cautionary warning about referencing Greg Sadler (as he is a leader in modern Stoicism) but then:

1 - I checked the article linked, and yes it is indeed a good comprehensive list of the surviving texts, and

2 - How can I criticize someone who writes?

The New Epicurean website has a very helpful and [organized listing of Seneca's letters that cite or refer to Epicurus](#), arranged according to topic.

So yes Greg Sadler's article is a good list of sources - I just don't recommend you follow him too closely on his views on Stoicism. 😊

Post by “TauPhi” of June 3, 2023 at 7:44 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So yes Greg Sadler's article is a good list of sources - I just don't recommend you follow him too closely on his views on Stoicism. 😊

I've already did my research on Stoicism in the past and I can confidently say it's not for me. I don't regret doing the research, though. And even if Greg Sadler were the incarnation of Lucifer himself, I'd still recommend his article as he did a great job there. 😊

Post by “Onenski” of June 7, 2023 at 6:48 PM

For me, Epicureanism is about: trying to be free from superstitions, looking for and enjoying satisfaction, recognizing everyday joys as well as identifying the sources of memorable pleasures. It's also to see life as a chance of living as pleasantly as we can, and death as the natural end of that chance.

[ThinkingCat](#), I hope you find motivation to deep in epicurean philosophy, and develop (with time) your own perspective, so that you can share with us your own conception of Epicureanism

in (more or lees) 30 words. ☐☐

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 8, 2023 at 9:12 AM

Cassius' post 27 above mentions the New Epicurean website (which was created by Cassius before the forum, if I am right on that?) and there is a lot of good stuff on there. I think that it also could be developed even further as a resource for people who want more "linear" reading on Epicureanism, rather than the "spiral" approach to study which the forum provides (reading the forum is a bit like going on a treasure hunt).

What is good about the New Epicurean website is that you can read the material without having to "raft through the rapids" of the forum. On the forum you often need to read a thread from start to finish, because a question (or an incorrect reflection) is presented in the first post, and it contains an incorrect understanding which is then corrected through the posting system...so that 20 or more posts later you get the full picture 😊

Here is the home page, imagine this could be developed further with an improved table of contents. Right now there is a table of key pages, but you need to scroll down to get to it:

[NewEpicurean - NewEpicurean.com - Promoting the Study of the Philosophy of Epicurus](https://www.newepicurean.com/)

Post by “Cassius” of June 8, 2023 at 9:21 AM

Also there is a Links page here with links to most of the other current Epicurean websites:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/link-overview/?pageNo=1&sortField=time&sortOrder=ASC>

Post by “Don” of June 8, 2023 at 9:44 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Also there is a Links page here with links to most of the other current Epicurean websites:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/link-overv...e&sortOrder=ASC>

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Post by "Godfrey" of June 8, 2023 at 2:25 PM

One interesting tidbit on NewEpicurean.com is Cosma Raimondi. I don't think I've heard of her before and I'll certainly read her letter.

Post by "Don" of June 8, 2023 at 4:37 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

One interesting tidbit on NewEpicurean.com is Cosma Raimondi. I don't think I've heard of her before and I'll certainly read her letter.

Turns out Cosma is a man's name. Final a is evidently for male names in Italy.

Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2023 at 5:10 PM

Yes that is a very good letter and we need to highlight it here. I thought we already had a thread but if not we will set one up