

Creating a "Seven Steps to the Ethics of Epicurus"

Post by "Kalosyni" of September 1, 2023 at 3:06 PM

Edit Note: See post 10 below for an updated version.

I am in the process of brainstorming...and would especially appreciate any ideas for "steps" or descriptions (and maybe it needs more than 7 steps?) from [Joshua](#), [Don](#), [Godfrey](#), [Martin](#), [TauPhi](#), [Onenski](#), and [kochiekoch](#).

The following "Seven Steps to the Ethics of Epicurus" is a work in progress:

1. The nature of the world, the soul, death, and god(s) - The basis of everything is atoms and void and nothing comes from nothing - there are no supernatural elements or forces, no afterlife, and no angry gods. Death is natural and not something to dread.
2. [Pleasure is the guide of life](#). Pleasure is good and pain is evil. But at times the painful is chosen if it prevents a worse pain or leads to a greater pleasure or to the health and happiness of the soul. The virtues are useful when they lead to pleasure and health.
3. Choices and avoidances according three categories -- natural & necessary for health of the body and the soul; natural but not necessary (a variation of sensation); unnatural and unnecessary.
4. Friendship
5. Safety
6. Justice
7. The gods are blissful beings who are to be emulated
8. Study natural science and practice the Epicurean ethics together with those of like mind.

Post by "Kalosyni" of September 1, 2023 at 3:36 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

8. Study natural science and practice the Epicurean ethics together with those of like mind.

This would also include application of "canonics".

And perhaps for modern day Epicureans this would also include studying climate change so as to understand the rate in which climate is changing (for the sake of understanding safety).

Post by "Joshua" of September 1, 2023 at 3:41 PM

You seem to have most of the core concepts well in hand; what about adding this to number 7? "The honor paid to the wise is a great good for those who honor them."

Post by "Don" of September 1, 2023 at 9:14 PM

I like the idea of "7 Steps" not for any mystical/metaphysical reason! because:

it's the number of days in a week

it's a manageable number to get one's head around

Even with the "7 days" analogy, it's like the "24 hours to..." book where "24 hours" wasn't one day, it was literally 24 hours as in 1 hour/day for 24 days and you can get through the book and its exercises.

I like the idea that this is "Seven Steps to the **Ethics** of Epicurus" because that's what lots of people are coming looking for.

Here are some specific thoughts from me from the current list.

1 is doing a LOT of heavy lifting, but I agree there has to be some Physics to serve as the Foundation (or should I say Phoundation, pun-spelling intended: Physics are the Phoundation; Physics are the Foundation of the Ethics). I wouldn't necessarily include the gods in the physics though.

I like 8 as emphasizing the need to study the natural world/science. Using Epicurus' quote of [DL 10.37] "Hence, since such a course is of service to all who take up natural science, I, who devote to the subject my continuous energy and reap the calm enjoyment of a life like this, have prepared for you just such an epitome and manual of the doctrines as a whole."

So, in your current list, I'd definitely agree with or augment/edit the following:

- 1 Yes! Definitely include some physics/fundamentals as the foundation for the ethics
- 2 Yes! Get Pleasure in there early and often
- 3 Yes! Choice and avoidance with the aid of practical wisdom, justice, "virtue" is the fundamental practice of an Epicurean life
- 4 Yes! Friendship - mutual support, etc. - are foundational
- 5 Not sure about this one, so I'd have to see more to know. Are 5 and 6 combinable? Are Safety and Justice two aspects of Justice writ large: The agreement neither to intentionally harm others nor to be intentionally harmed by others?
- 6 See 5
- 7 A right understanding of the gods has to be in there somewhere, same as a right understanding of death
- 8 see above for why I'd like to see the list kept to 7, but also why I think 8's sentiment has to be somewhere. Maybe within 1's foundation of physics. It's not enough to have that foundation but you also have to study and understand it and apply it.

Since the letter to Menoikeus is our primary summary of Epicurean ethics, it can be broken down into the following points:

1. A correct view of the gods
2. A correct view of death
3. A correct understanding of desires and the goal of a happy life: Pleasure is the foundation and culmination of well-being.
4. How to choose between pleasure and pain and how to be "self-reliant."
5. Knowing the value of practical wisdom/phronesis, justice, and excellence
6. Knowing the place of Fate and chance in one's life
7. The value of studying with "those like yourself" (ὁμοιον σεαυτῷ)

According to Epicurus in his letter, who is better than someone who:

- holds pious opinions about the gods,
- is always fearless in the face of death
- has reasoned out the natural goal of life
- has understood that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to achieve, whereas the limit of bad things is either short-lived or causes little pain
- laughs at destiny and considers it better to be rationally unfortunate than irrationally fortunate

BUT this letter leaves out some significant topics, like friendship, so where' back to looking at other lists and texts.

First thoughts from me.

Post by “Don” of September 3, 2023 at 6:51 PM

In looking at the PDs for some ideas, I took a clue from Cyril Bailey's summary of the PDs. He categorized them as:

1-4: The tetrapharmakos, the four-fold fundamental principles necessary for a tranquil life

5: The relation of pleasure to virtue

6, 7: Protection from external disturbances

8-10: The selection of pleasures

11-13: The ethical value of physical science

14-21: The wise man's life in relation to nature, his fellow men, and to true pleasure (can be sub-divided)

22-26: The tests and standards of moral (i.e., truly pleasant) action

27, 28: Friendship

29, 30: The classification of desires

31-38: Justice and injustice

39, 40: The wise man's life in the Epicurean community

Now there are many things about which I don't agree with Bailey, but this list is helpful as a starting point.

[PD01](#) and [PD02](#) are the ubiquitous correct understanding of the gods and death.

[PD05](#) gives the standard formula about living pleasurably entails living virtuously/ethically, and vice versa.

[PD08](#) to [PD10](#) talks about making the correct choices and rejections, the core of Epicurean day to day (moment to moment) practice. The practice seems to me to be brought up again in [PD20](#) through [PD26](#). Those are sections I need to investigate in my unending quest to re-compose *Principle Doctrines* as a text. [PD29](#) (necessary, unnecessary desires, etc.) and [PD30](#) are an important "how to do it" text as well.

[PD11](#) to [PD13](#) talk about the necessity of understanding "how things work" when it comes to allaying fears and superstitions about "astronomical phenomena and death and suffering," "myths," and "what is above and below the earth and in general about the infinite unknown." This conveys the importance of studying natural science and to understand how the physical, material universe works.

[PD14](#) and [PD15](#) talks about the fact that unlimited wealth isn't necessary to pursue a pleasurable life. Sufficient wealth is "limited and easy to acquire."

[PD17](#) is a good reminder: "One who acts aright (δίκαιος) is utterly steady and serene (ἀταρακτότατος), whereas one who goes astray is full of trouble and confusion."

[PD27](#) is our friendship one!

The Justice PDs are important from an ethical standpoint in that they say how people should treat each other, especially [PD31](#) "Natural justice is a covenant for mutual benefit, to not harm one another or be harmed."

[PD39](#) and 40 are not straightforward when trying to translate, but are potentially helpful.

Post by "TauPhi" of September 3, 2023 at 8:51 PM

Few things that crossed my mind:

1. The concept of free will is a crucial part of Epicurean Ethics. Swerving atoms and the consequence of this phenomenon should be included in the steps.
2. Maybe it would be beneficial to name the concepts where applicable when describing ethical ideas (things like: atomism, hedonism, hedonistic calculus, egoism etc.)
3. I agree with Don that points 5 & 6 are closely linked together.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

And perhaps for modern day Epicureans this would also include studying climate change so as to understand the rate in which climate is changing (for the sake of understanding safety).

4. I'd personally drop the idea of mentioning climate change in the steps because:

- it has never been a part of Epicurus teachings
- it's politically charged topic which will most likely distract audience from the study of ethics
- the study of climate change is by all means desirable but so is anything else that falls into natural science category
- and lastly, to our knowledge Earth's climate changes permanently and periodically over the course of billions of years so whether we like it or not, we as species are definitely not safe on this planet and sooner or later our home will be home no more (at least for several thousands years until climate changes favourably once again)

[Yes, I'm avoiding the issue of human impact on climate on purpose so please refrain yourself from making emotional comments below and let's all stick to philosophy ;)]

Post by “Don” of September 3, 2023 at 10:13 PM

I would agree with [TauPhi](#) in general that calling out climate change specifically isn't necessary as this falls under the study of how the universe works and of natural science.

I see where [Kalosyni](#) is coming from though about seeing it as a safety and security issue, but I don't think it necessarily needs its own call-out. Not to say it can't come up in discussions!

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 5, 2023 at 5:36 PM

Thank you everyone for your contributions. I will digest these suggestions and add in some of them. It does seem that everyone has their way of slicing and dicing, so there really isn't one "right" formula. Anyone can contribute here...and/or create individual personal outlines over in that section (since I may not add in everything that has been suggested).

[Forum Member Outlines of Epicurean Philosophy](#)

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 21, 2023 at 9:51 AM

Creating Seven Steps...a thread which I started some weeks ago, almost fell back in the vast ocean of this forum. By chance found it again, spurred on by the recent very good posting by [Titus](#) - which you can read his very good thoughts on ethics over on his personal outline thread:

Post

RE: Titus' personal outline

(3) The nature of how to live.

This could also be seen as a continuation of the [Epicurean Philosophy Navigation Chart](#) to expand the Ethics. A preliminary list of topics that are important to me:

1. Awareness of becoming and passing away, consciousness of life and death in respect to the nature of the universe, processuality of life
2. Pursuing/Focussing the natural desires which
 - a.) is Nature's yardstick for happiness
 - b.) leads to self-sufficiency and autarky
 - c.) reveals life as an inexhaustible...
■

Titus

September 21, 2023 at 4:46 AM

I definitely would like to include what Titus has written into the mix here in this thread and possibly for further development on materials - I really want to move forward the idea that I have for either a "7 Steps" or maybe a "Handbook on Epicurean Ethics".

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 12, 2024 at 6:04 PM

Here is a work-in-progress outline for a course on the Ethics of Epicurus. (I will be adding in more details, and still needing to incorporate the above tips by Don, and others, as well as add in from Cassius' wiki list: Epicurean Ethics).

The Ethics of Epicurus 7 Week Course

Week 1: Introduction to Epicurean Philosophy Basics

Topics:

- Epicurus' life and historical context
- Brief overview of basic concepts: a materialist universe of "atoms and void" and Epicurean canonics (senses, feelings, and anticipations)
- no supernatural gods and everything has natural causes (non-supernature nature of the universe)
- the nature of the soul, and death is the end of both the body and soul.

Readings:

- "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Norman DeWitt - Chapter 2: "Samos and Athens"
- "[Philosophy for the Millions](#)" essay by Norman DeWitt

Week 2: The Nature of Pleasure and Pain

Topics:

- The definition of pleasure and pain based on sensation, and Nature's goal.
- Pleasure as the telos (highest good).
- The absence of pain as pleasure. Reframing the cognition of pleasure - there is no neutral state, so if you are not feeling pain then that is understood as feeling pleasure.
- The limits of pleasure and pain, and dealing with physical pain.
- The relationship of happiness to pleasure.
- Types of Desires: natural and necessary desires, natural but unnecessary desires, and vain desires.
- Choice and Avoidance - circumstance and outcome determines choiceworthiness.
- Continuous pleasure - the role of making and recalling happy memories.

Readings:

- Letter to Menoecus

- <https://newepicurean.com/the-true-natur...urean-pleasure/>
- Cicero's "On Ends" Torquatus section

Week 3: The Role of Virtue

Topics:

- The relationship between virtue and pleasure, instrumental value of virtues - tools not rules.
- "Good" and "evil" according to Epicurus.
- Prudence and Temperance, and how Epicurean beliefs lead to ethical living. "Moderation in all things" is an incorrect way to make choices -- prudence uses reason as well as evaluation or pleasure/pain and unique circumstances.
- Justice and how the choice of non-harming leads to a pleasant life.
- Courage - sometimes short-term pain must be endured to for the most pleasant outcome (or to avoid a worse pain) or for the health of the body

Readings:

Week 4: The Epicurean View of Gods and Death; Nature, Science, and Well-Being

Topics:

- Epicurean views on god(s)
- Working through the fear of death
- Nature and natural causes (no supernatural forces)
- Science vs Epicurean canonics (and the ancient idea of observations followed by hypothesis)
- Dealing with the incorrect notion of the need to find meaning (this comes out of Christianity or a lack of social connection)
- The "Epicurean Trilemma" (which was not originated by Epicurus)
- Removing religious anxieties of death and god (the nature of death and the soul) and developing rapport with Nature.

Readings:

Week 5: Friendship, Community, and Reverence for the Wise Man

Topics:

- Importance of friendship, social bonds, and community in achieving a pleasurable life.

- The role of studying together and the Twentieth celebration as community sustaining rituals.
- The role of honoring those who are wise in Epicurean understanding and practice.
- Tips on how to create strong friendships.

Readings:

Week 6: Freedom, Personal Agency, Self-Sufficiency, Tranquility vs Risk-taking, and Clear-minded Living

Topics:

- Definition of autarky
- Free will and personal responsibility - free will frees us from determinism and fate.
- Further discussion on choices and avoidances (natural, natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, unnatural: vain/empty and unnecessary)
- Risk-taking as an individual choice (there is only this life)
- Sound mind in a healthy body

Readings:

Week 7: Applying the Philosophy of Epicurus in Modern Daily Life

Topics:

- Choice and avoidance and practical applications (thinking through career choices, marriage or staying single, and discussion of other practical dilemmas)
- Living with non-Epicureans who are religious or believe in supernatural powers
- The avoidance of being in the spotlight (pros and cons)
- Tips for starting an Epicurean philosophy study group

Readings: