

Epicurus vs Pythagorus - General

Post by "Cassius" of January 30, 2025 at 2:33 PM

This will kick off a general thread about Pythagorus.

Our friend Chatgpt starts off the comparison pretty well I think:

Epicurus was highly critical of Pythagorean philosophy, particularly its mystical and mathematical approach to understanding the universe. The Pythagoreans, following the teachings of Pythagoras, believed in the fundamental role of numbers in the cosmos, the transmigration of souls, and the idea that reality was governed by abstract mathematical principles. Epicurus, on the other hand, adhered to a materialist and empiricist philosophy rooted in the atomism of Democritus, rejecting any notion of supernatural forces or mystical structures governing existence.

One of his key criticisms was directed at the Pythagorean doctrine of the immortality and transmigration of the soul. Epicurus argued that the soul was composed of fine material atoms and that it perished with the body, thereby dismissing the idea of reincarnation and any posthumous existence. He saw such beliefs as a source of irrational fear, particularly the fear of divine punishment after death, which he aimed to eliminate through his philosophical teachings.

Moreover, Epicurus rejected the Pythagorean reliance on mathematical abstraction as a means of explaining the natural world. While he acknowledged the utility of mathematics for practical purposes, he insisted that knowledge of nature should be based on empirical observation and direct sensory experience rather than on numerical speculations. He viewed the Pythagoreans' emphasis on mathematical harmony as an unnecessary detour from a correct understanding of the physical world.

Thus, Epicurus regarded Pythagoreanism as an obstacle to true wisdom, as it promoted superstitions and unfounded speculations that led people away from a clear and naturalistic understanding of reality.

When asked to provide cites for that, Chatgpt says (but keep in mind that these "Quotes" are more like paraphases):

Epicurus' critiques of Pythagorean philosophy are not preserved in full, but we can infer his position from surviving texts and references by later authors. Here are some key sources that support his opposition to Pythagorean ideas:

1. Critique of the Immortality of the Soul

- In *Letter to Herodotus* (Section 63), Epicurus explicitly states that the soul is made of fine atoms and disperses upon death:

Quote

"Moreover, we must grasp the concept that the soul is a body of fine particles distributed throughout the entire aggregate, most closely resembling breath with an admixture of heat."

- This directly contradicts the Pythagorean doctrine of the soul's transmigration and immortality.

2. Rejection of Divine Governance and Fate

- In *Letter to Menoeceus* (Sections 133-134), Epicurus denies divine intervention in the world:

Quote

"The gods exist, but they do not trouble themselves with human affairs."

- This contradicts the Pythagorean belief in an ordered cosmos governed by divine numerical principles.

3. Criticism of Mathematical Abstraction

- In *Letter to Pythocles* (Sections 86-88), Epicurus warns against unnecessary speculation in celestial phenomena:

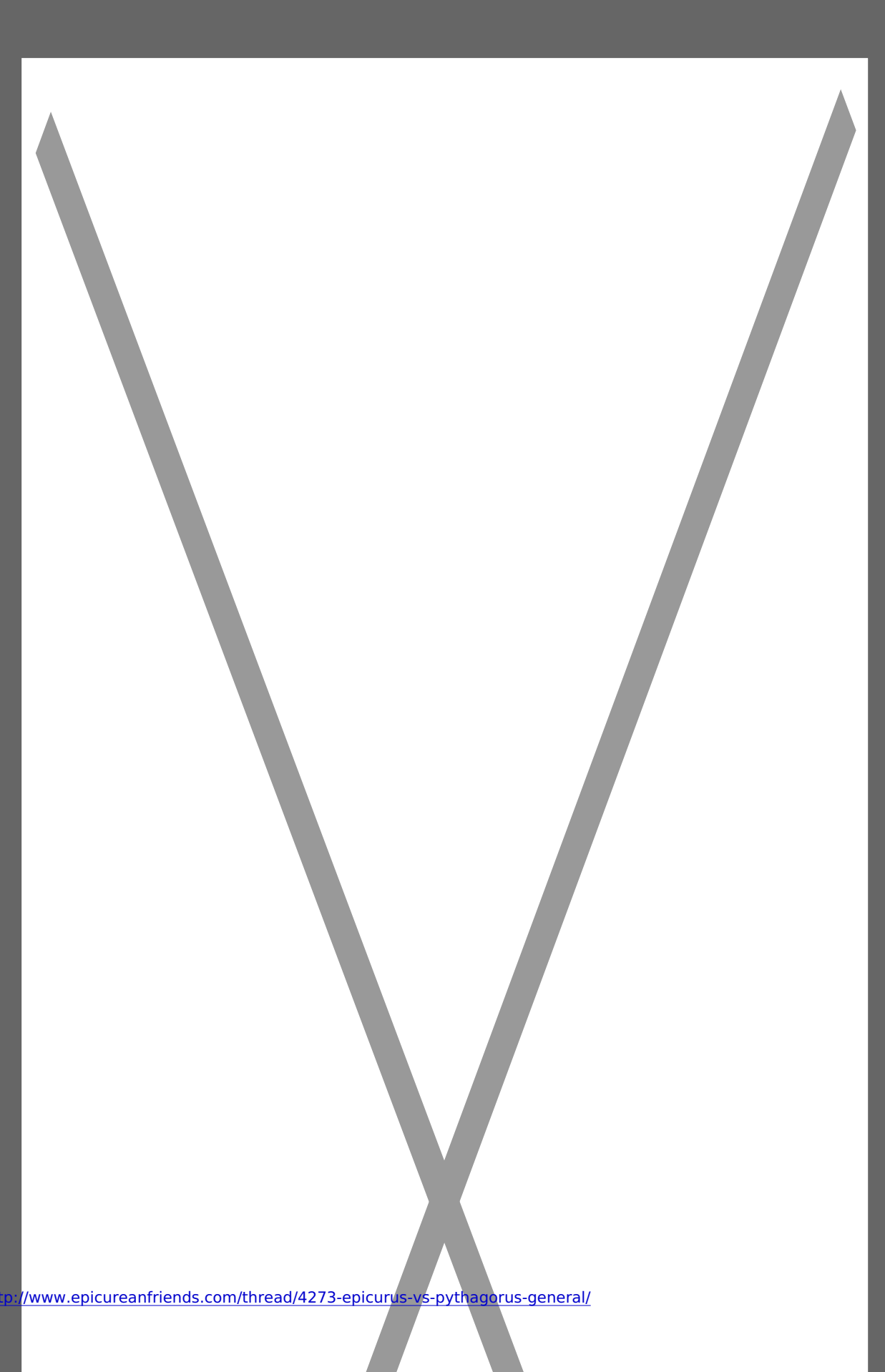
Quote

"We must not adopt empty assumptions and arbitrary conjectures in explaining celestial phenomena but rather adhere to what is grounded in evidence."

- This can be read as a rejection of the Pythagorean tendency to prioritize numerical and mystical explanations over empirical observation.

These passages provide strong evidence that Epicurus viewed Pythagorean philosophy as a source of superstition and unnecessary abstraction, favoring instead an empirical and materialist understanding of nature.

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Post by “Bryan” of January 30, 2025 at 4:00 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

One of his key criticisms was directed at the Pythagorean doctrine of the immortality and transmigration of the soul.

Epikouros was undeterred by the Pythagorean threat that, if he built his science upon sensation, his spirit would be metempsychotized into a bird.

"And the tribe of birds are derived by transformation, growing feathers in place of hair, from men who are harmless but light-minded—men, too, who, being students of the worlds above, suppose in their simplicity that the most solid proofs about such matters are obtained by the sense of sight." [Timaeus, 91d fin.]

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 30, 2025 at 8:33 PM

There's a strong similarity between Pythagoras and ancient Indian philosophies. I want to suggest that Pythagoreanism is Vedic mysticism processed through ancient Greek Philosophy (in the same way I argue that Pyrrhonism is *Ajñāna* processed through ancient Greek Philosophy), except that I do not believe that we have record of Pythagoras going further East than Mesopotamia, as was the achievement of Alexander III and those (Pyrrho) who followed him into India.

I continue searching for a historical connection (though there may not be one).

Post by “Bryan” of January 30, 2025 at 9:06 PM

I agree, Eikadistes. I feel as though the circumstantial evidence we have is sufficient to accept the theory.

In general outline, it seems Plato, as he aged, became less skeptical and more Pythagorean. The old academy would have been the most influenced by Pythagoreanism. Of course, later on, the more skeptical new academy more closely aligned with skepticism seen in Plato's earlier and public works.

The old academy is the least known, least public, and the most "mystic." This Pythagorean-influenced Platonism would have been the version of Platonism that Epikouros was arguing against.