

# Daily life of ancient Epicureans / 21st Century Epicureans

## Post by “Robert” of May 21, 2025 at 8:23 PM

First of all, hello (again)! I joined more than a year ago but have been fairly quiet since.

Eikas got me wondering whether there were other practices, observances, or rituals that ancient Epicureans followed, perhaps on a daily basis. If so, what might these have been? What might the typical day of an Epicurean in 3rd-century Athens (or 1st-century Herculaneum) have been like, and how would they have incorporated Epicureanism into it?

As 21st-century Epicureans, how do *you* integrate it into your daily life? Is there any particular structure or set of practices involved?

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of May 22, 2025 at 7:42 AM

### [Quote from Robert](#)

As 21st-century Epicureans, how do you integrate it into your daily life? Is there any particular structure or set of practices involved?

[Robert](#) that is an interesting question. For myself, it is reading/study (online or books) and contemplation of the ideas and how to apply them to my own life.

Perhaps @Eikadistes may have something to share in regard to that.

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## Post by “Cassius” of May 22, 2025 at 8:04 AM

I don't think of myself as having particular structure, but in my case I am pretty much constantly working with this website and reading and studying the texts and thinking of new ways to present it and talking to people about it. I suspect that the normal days of Lucretius or Diogenes of Oinoanda or Philodemus would have been pretty similar. The word "ritual" evokes a

lot of both positive and negative connotations given the way we think of rituals working in the standard supernatural religions, and I tend to avoid those personally.

The most on-point advise that I recall is:

[VS41](#). We must laugh and philosophize at the same time, and do our household duties, and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.

To me, this kind of approach means that *everything* you do is folded into the master plan of living happily according to Epicurus' worldview, but on the other hand almost *nothing* you do is hard-wired to a particular absolute "ritual," because that's not the way life is - you're always adjusting to circumstances to produce the best result. You're either living by Epicurean ideas consciously and intentionally moment by moment, or during those deviations you're not really living by Epicurean ideas at all, no matter what "ritual" you might be engaged in.

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### Post by “DaveT” of May 22, 2025 at 10:39 AM

Robert, your question makes me wonder how I might incorporate some aspect of Epicurus' general guidance into my daily life.

I interpret what I have learned so far from Epicurus is that he essentially says something like; here's my idea of how people live life to the fullest; pursue happiness and avoid unhappiness. Do this by asking if some activity gives you pleasure (or the promise of pleasure) or does it reduce mental or physical pain (or promise to do so)

Fortunately he didn't lay out rituals, unless it is an admonition to think about the consequences of your natural desires and actions either beforehand or afterwards.

So, looking at one of the Vatican sayings: [VS71](#). **Question each of your desires: “What will happen to me if that which this desire seeks is achieved, and what if it is not?”** simply requires I create a daily/weekly/monthly practice to ask myself that question. Whether that becomes my personal "ritual" to live a happy Epicurean life remains my task.

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### Post by “Cassius” of May 22, 2025 at 11:54 AM

I should have added that early in my study I printed out some pictures, worked on some 3d busts, etc. I never graduated to ring or pendants but those are good too, ieth the basic idea

that its a good think to have occasional reminders in your surroundings that the philosophy is more than just an idea but that real people - lots of them - engaged in it too in the past, and you can be a part of that self-chosen group no matter how distant. I like thinking that I am part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

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## Post by “Eikadistes” of May 22, 2025 at 12:01 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Robert](#)

As 21st-century Epicureans, how do you integrate it into your daily life? Is there any particular structure or set of practices involved?

Perhaps @Eikadistes may have something to share in regard to that.

Most definitely! More than just passing curiosities, the teachings of the Garden provide practical guidance so we can confidently respond to the obstacles that characterize daily life:

*"We must simultaneously laugh and philosophize and manage a household and administrate the economic affairs and never let go of the language of the true philosophies." (VS 41)*

(1) Memorizing and reciting the *Doctrines*, and parts of the *Epitomes* are prescribed spiritual practices from the Hegemon. A few random, but specific examples I can think of:

- You can't have permanently "bad luck". *It's not like there's a supernatural STD...*
- Forgive yourself for anger, but restrain yourself against rage.
- FDR took this one, but, literally: the source of the worst turmoil is *"the fears themselves"*.
- **"What Would Epicurus Do?"** Our acronym "SFOTSE" essentially conveys this idea.
- There is no "Perfect State". Your historical fears are comparatively normal. Breathe.
- WHEN you get stressed working in an artificial climate, go take a breather outside.
- Don't eat alone. (*You're not a rogue tiger; no need to cosplay as one*).
- Try to make friends with everyone you can. If you can't, do your best to avoid them.
- Make the most of the time you're given (*thanks, Gandalf*). You only live once.

I'm just paraphrasing, but the sources of those statements help us focus on the most important things, spiritual/intellectual tools. Along those lines, he specifically calls 1-4 the "most important".

Incidentally, Philódēmos calls *Doctrines* 1-4 the "most important", and preserves them in his proverbial "*Tetrapharmakos*", a recipe to prepare a person for the blessed life. It contains a short list of ingredients: recognition that life is a product of nature, acceptance that we only live once, assurance that life is worth living, remembrance that terror is temporary; pleasure is inevitable.

That last one is actually really helpful in dealing with turmoil (that 4th doctrine), that *pain is temporary*. For me, it's a kind of spiritual mantra akin to "*All Things Must Pass*". No matter how bad things get, you're one step closer to the pleasurable goal of life. Even facing terminal conditions, as long as we still have awareness, we have power over our ability to *choose to try to be chill*.

So, I *do* actually flip around the Tetrapharmakos in my mind, along with a few memorable sayings.

They also really come in handy for discussions. Epíkouros provides us with some really great quips that immediately address a handful of very popular, very intellectually-lazy beliefs that are rearing their heads in the maze of a society consumed with media and technology. The bubbles of some of these ideas can be easily popped by posing things in an Epicurean light. For example:

- "You saw a *ghost*"? Tell me, what exactly does a "*bodiless body*" look like?
- "The world isn't *real*?" How exactly are you walking on "*immaterial material*"?
- "You *don't believe your eyes*?" What *sense* can you have without your *senses*?

*Anyway*, memorizing lines, propositions, and key points, like mantras, is a large part of the practice. In this group, I'd include anything related to capturing a higher resolution picture of the philosophy through studying ancient history, economics, or anything that helps advance your personal study.

(2) Then there are the gatherings. Like you mentioned, Eikas is the unifying one, but there are also holidays. As it turns out, celebrating one's birthday was not a common practice in ancient Greece, but was, at least, for a period, seen as a Persian import. Epíkouros prescribed the celebration of his own birthday, and observed celebrations for each of his family members, and his best friends, so the notion of having personal celebrations (which we commonly do as "Birthdays"), is categorically Epicurean. It's sort of a "*gimme*" in our culture, because of the coherence, but it *is* also on point.

We recognize major life events with feasts and celebrations, just like any other tradition. Weddings and funerals are universal, and we each co-opt them with our preferred spiritual flavor. There isn't, necessarily, a prescribed "New Human in the Community" ritual for Epicureans, though I'm not opposed to it (I mean something like a *secular baptism*). We don't have any specific

(3) Any kind of liberatory practice (like offering libations at the beginning of Eikas to the kathegemones) falls in this category. Maybe this comes in the form of setting aside a personal tithe, or donating. We support medical research efforts that will contribute to providing future cures for illnesses that affected our loved ones, and all of this is contextualized in a belief that reality is knowable, science if advanceable, cures are discoverable, and the **one** life each generation receives can be improved, so long as we all agree to abandon superstition and magical thinking.

Those are fairly ubiquitous practices that aren't specific to Epicureans, but, even if the currents of our culture shifted directions, I would still abide by these behaviors, to some degree.

(4) Ancient Epicureans made art and jewelry in the name of the tradition, and many of us here (check out [Bryan's](#) latest post for a perfect example) follow suit. I'm don't usually wear rings and necklaces, but I own a few t-shirts with the Hegemon's head, magnets, and other decor. That's a little more on the peripheral side of the art, and less to do with spiritual practice, but it still comes from a place of reflection and devotion and, I believe, let's us have our own historical expression to demonstrate the sort of experience we are having with the tradition in this period.

I've also got a few Epicurean tattoos. Just another example in the category of *spiritual devotion*.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

*everything* you do is folded into the master plan of living happily according to Epicurus' worldview

I think [Cassius](#) really nails the main point, which is that everything we do, as a result of these deeply-help philosophical positions, is affected, guided, and directed by those beliefs. Otherwise, our lifestyles are all essentially the same. Most of us are paying too much for eggs, and burning more petroleum than we thought we would, and spending our days replacing tires and tying trash bags. It's usually only when it comes to Death, or something heavy, that the rest of the "religious crowd" properly invokes their religious identity. Otherwise, we're trying to find new places to put our plastic, convincing ourselves we're eating right, and consuming entertainment.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 22, 2025 at 12:43 PM**

There's also another important - but a little less pleasant to discuss - side of things. Not everyone in this world is, or wants to be, or is going to be your friend. Nor are you going to

succeed in making them so, no matter how you might try to do so. Epicurean philosophy teaches you to be aware that many contentious issues such as supernatural gods and life after death are not just neutral, take-it-or-leave-it, or compromisable issues.

One analogy I think I can make without offending anyone is as to cigarette manufacturers, who apparently at this point in history are acknowledged to have made their products more addictive even while knowing that they were deadly. Without harping on one example, I think there are plenty of instances where we have to recognize that not everyone is supportive of everyone else's best interests (to say the least). Epicurean philosophy teaches you to immunize yourself against many impositions by giving you a basic orientation toward the universe that helps defeat those negative forces in life.

That's a huge point, and arguably in the ancient Epicurean calculus of higher priority even than identifying happiness as your goal. The major doctrines all fit together logically, hand in glove, but the first and second most important doctrines on the list are telling you to first and foremost watch out for those who would manipulate you with bad motives.

That's an attitude toward the world that needs to be constantly a part of how we live our daily lives, and I consider it along with the swerve free will / personal responsibility) to be one of the most distinctly Epicurean characteristics.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 22, 2025 at 1:57 PM**

[Exhibit A to my last post](#). If anyone wants to comment on it I'll crosspost this to physics, but the number of similar articles is innumerable and this is of note only because it's new. These guys have been organized for 2000+ years and the drumbeat *never* stops - so neither can our organizing an immunization.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of May 22, 2025 at 4:00 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurean philosophy teaches you to immunize yourself against many impositions by giving you a basic orientation toward the universe that helps defeat those negative forces in life.

There are so many things that are part of common culture that have nothing to do with a living a pleasant, pleasurable, and "blessed-as-if-living-like-the-gods" life -- and they are all just "empty opinion" (I'm especially talking about what we buy, and what we think we should buy, based on what everyone else is doing - food, clothing, home decor, etc.

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### **Post by "Rolf" of May 22, 2025 at 5:04 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

the first and second most important doctrines on the list are telling you to first and foremost watch out for those who would manipulate you with bad motives.

Which doctrines are you referring to?

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### **Post by "Cassius" of May 22, 2025 at 8:17 PM**

#### [Rolf](#)

[PD01](#). The blessed and incorruptible nature knows no trouble itself, nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favor. For all such things exist only in the weak. [\[1\]](#)

[PD02](#). [Death is nothing to us](#), for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.

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### **Post by "Kalosyni" of May 22, 2025 at 8:50 PM**

#### [Quote from Rolf](#)

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

the first and second most important doctrines on the list are telling you to first and foremost watch out for those who would manipulate you with bad motives.

Which doctrines are you referring to?

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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[PD02](#). [Death is nothing to us](#), for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.

And to add to what [Cassius](#) said, more specifically referring to those who are trying to convert people to a religious viewpoint which holds that a God will judge you in the afterlife.

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## **Post by “Robert” of May 22, 2025 at 11:51 PM**

Thank you all for your responses! I notice a common theme among them: Epicurean practice involves studying/contemplating/understanding the teachings and then applying them to the various life situations we encounter. A cognitive-behavioral approach, if you will.

For context, two things prompted my question. Firstly, I was thinking about Epicurean communities and what these would have been like on a day-to-day basis. Communities often have a shared set of practices (which give some structure to the community), so I wondered if this was true of the Garden and its successors.

Secondly, I was reading Voula Tsouna's chapter on Epicurean "therapies" (in her book on the ethics of Philodemus), which got me thinking about how we might view Epicureanism as a set of practices, as opposed to (simply) a set of views.

[@Eikadistes](#), I'm reminded of this distinction when you write that Epicurean teachings aren't "passing curiosities" but "practical guidance so we can confidently respond to the obstacles that characterize daily life." Also, your comments on memorization/recitation dovetail with what I just read in Sorabji's chapter (in *Emotion and Peace of Mind*) on Hellenistic spiritual exercises, as well as Hadot's discussion of same (in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*). Both authors point to

memorization as a characteristic Epicurean practice.

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### Post by “Robert” of May 22, 2025 at 11:58 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurean philosophy teaches you to immunize yourself against many impositions by giving you a basic orientation toward the universe that helps defeat those negative forces in life.

There are so many things that are part of common culture that have nothing to do with a living a pleasant, pleasurable, and "blessed-as-if-living-like-the-gods" life -- and they are all just "empty opinion" (I'm especially talking about what we buy, and what we think we should buy, based on what everyone else is doing - food, clothing, home decor, etc.

If I'm thirsty, and convince myself that I need to have soda, beer, or whatever, might that also be an example? After all, very often a glass of water will do just fine.

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### Post by “Robert” of May 23, 2025 at 12:05 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Exhibit A to my last post](#). If anyone wants to comment on it I'll crosspost this to physics, but the number of similar articles is innumerable and this is of note only because it's new. These guys have been organized for 2000+ years and the drumbeat *never* stops - so neither can our organizing an immunization.

Ugh, yes. Thing I wonder about is to what extent these folks know they're BS-ing.

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### Post by “Robert” of May 23, 2025 at 12:10 AM

### [Quote from DaveT](#)

So, looking at one of the Vatican sayings: [VS71](#). **Question each of your desires: “What will happen to me if that which this desire seeks is achieved, and what if it is not?”** simply requires I create a daily/weekly/monthly practice to ask myself that question. Whether that becomes my personal "ritual" to live a happy Epicurean life remains my task.

That's such a great, practical approach. I found several occasions today to apply it at work--e.g. the wish to argue with someone, not reply to an email, etc.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of May 23, 2025 at 6:05 AM**

### [Quote from Robert](#)

If I'm thirsty, and convince myself that I need to have soda, beer, or whatever, might that also be an example? After all, very often a glass of water will do just fine.

I think that here we're talking about the necessary / unnecessary / etc analysis, which yes addresses the problem that through our own mistake, or through outside conditioning, we end up thinking that we have to have X in order to be satisfied, but in truth Y would produce a better overall pleasure over pain result.

The thing I like to caution against, though, is thinking that what a person should target is "just enough to get by" as if "just enough" is the goal. The goal is choosing the "most pleasant" option, rather than the "just enough" option, and I would argue that there is a very important difference between the two. Sometimes the soda, beer, etc., is in fact the most pleasant option and worthy of being chosen.

As VS 63 is usually translated, "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess."

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of May 23, 2025 at 6:46 AM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Sometimes the soda, beer, etc., is in fact the most pleasant option and worthy of being chosen.

It's all about reasoning through things.

Soda (as in any drink sweetened with high fructose corn syrup or sugar) is one of the top things that causes tooth decay, as well as disruption of metabolic processes (leads to diabetes) - but once or twice in a year wouldn't hurt (like if you were visiting a friend and all they had to offer was soda and it seemed easier to just accept the soda rather than ask for water).

Now beer may end up being healthier than soda, but I'd have to research that 😄

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of May 23, 2025 at 7:14 AM**

Again, reasoning through things, regarding beer...which contains alcohol...and so wouldn't be considered healthy. (see article excerpt below).

But perhaps once a month or less, or according to each person's choice and avoidance, and if you have a strong enough liver (as people age the liver isn't functioning as well.)

I personally have decided that I won't drink alcohol unless it is a very special occasion (such as a wedding).

Plus it's important to be sure to eat some food when drinking alcohol so that the absorption is slowed down.

#### Quote

As explained in this article, alcohol metabolism also results in the generation of acetaldehyde, a highly reactive and toxic byproduct that may contribute to tissue damage, the formation of damaging molecules known as reactive oxygen species (ROS), and a change in the reduction-oxidation (or redox) state of liver cells. Chronic alcohol consumption and alcohol metabolism are strongly linked to several pathological consequences and tissue damage.

[Source](#)

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### **Post by “Don” of May 23, 2025 at 7:32 AM**

I'm late to the game here, but I'd offer that philosophy - as conceived of in the ancient schools - was always meant to be lived. One chose a school (or took a more eclectic approach as I'd argue Cicero does in certain ways), and lived one's life in accordance with what one learned from one's teacher and one's school: Stoic, Peripatetic, Platonic, Skeptic, Epicurean, etc. As time went on, "religion" moved into that sphere - I'm thinking especially of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism (although some call that a philosophy - depends on the flavor I suppose), especially when those major religions got the imprimatur of government authority... like when the Roman emperor decided it would behoove him to have one emperor, one religion, one empire kind of thing. Later, philosophy became (in the popular and academic mind) a "subject" one studied apart from living one's life. In more recent time, the ancient schools - I'd argue spearheaded by "Stoics" (and, yes, I'm putting it deliberately in quotes) - have seen a revival of sorts, including [philosophical counseling](#). Our little corner of the internet is one of the ways Epicurus' philosophy is part of that renewal, revival, and renaissance.

As far as ...

#### [Quote from Robert](#)

As 21st-century Epicureans, how do you integrate it into your daily life? Is there any particular structure or set of practices involved?

I try to incorporate the personal responsibility of choice/rejection in light of pleasure/pain. I try to keep perspective when it comes to the temporary nature of pain (NOT always easy in the moment!!). I try to ingrain VS35 in my thinking:

35. Don't ruin the things you have by wanting what you don't have, but realize that they too are things you once did wish for. οὐ δεῖ λυμαίνεσθαι τὰ παρόντα τῶν ἀπόντων ἐπιθυμία, ἀλλ' ἐπιλογίζεσθαι ὅτι καὶ ταῦτα τῶν εὐκταίων ἦν.

I even have it hanging inconspicuously on my office door at work.

#### [Quote from Robert](#)

If I'm thirsty, and convince myself that I need to have soda, beer, or whatever, might that also be an example? After all, very often a glass of water will do just fine.

On this point, yes, water would quench your thirst. But if the soda, beer, or whatever doesn't cause undue hardship to acquire or provide more pain than pleasure, I truly don't think Epicurus has any injunction against choosing that option. I regularly go back to the idea that Epicurus - on occasion - would limit himself to just enough simple food to gauge what amount it really took for him to live pleurably, to be happy, so he would know that IF it was *necessary* to live on that amount, he could do it. Given whatever circumstances might come up in his life, he was confident in his ability to find pleasure IF it came down to it by experimenting from time

to time in this way. I'm utterly convinced he did NOT live this way all the time.

As others have mentioned, Epicurus took part in commemorations (rituals) of his own birthday, his family's, his friends, and took part in the large city festivals regularly. I think you can also incorporate an Epicurean mindset when taking part in holidays - even if you attend church services as pro forma with family. Epicurus and the early Epicureans took part in rituals and processions and other civic affairs that paid homage and sacrifice to the gods; but I'm convinced they were not (mentally) taking part the way most in the crowds were participating. They saw the gods differently, but could take pleasure in the festivities and even the sacrifices which were a part of every civic festival. So, enjoy our (American) secular festivities like Thanksgiving, or "religious/secular" events like Christmas.. but feel free to put your own Epicurean spin on things even its only to yourself.

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### **Post by "Robert" of May 25, 2025 at 2:53 PM**

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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But perhaps once a month or less, or according to each person's choice and avoidance, and if you have a strong enough liver (as people age the liver isn't functioning as well.)

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#### [Source](#)

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Yes, I think the calculus delivers different results as we age. I'm in my late fifties now and less inclined to bring on a hangover. I also don't take the health of my liver for granted, or assume that I'm immune to diabetes.

None of which means that I won't order a beer at the family event I'm attending this evening.



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## Post by “Robert” of May 25, 2025 at 3:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Robert](#)

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I think that here we're talking about the necessary / unnecessary / etc analysis, which yes addresses the problem that through our own mistake, or through outside conditioning, we end up thinking that we have to have X in order to be satisfied, but in truth Y would produce a better overall pleasure over pain result.

The thing I like to caution against, though, is thinking that what a person should target is "just enough to get by" as if "just enough" is the goal. The goal is choosing the "most pleasant" option, rather than the "just enough" option, and I would argue that there is a very important difference between the two. Sometimes the soda, beer, etc., is in fact the most pleasant option and worthy of being chosen.

As VS 63 is usually translated, "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess."

Thanks--that's a helpful clarification. FWIW, I had in mind situations in which our pleasure is diminished by not having something we *think* that we need (e.g. alcohol or coffee). This can happen while traveling, for instance, or when attending a party where booze is not being served. Habitual attachment to an unnecessary pleasure creates mental turmoil (and sometimes unpleasant bodily sensations as well, aka withdrawal symptoms).

## Post by “Rolf” of May 25, 2025 at 4:01 PM

### [Quote from Robert](#)

Habitual attachment to an unnecessary pleasure creates mental turmoil

Good point Robert - sort of an inverse of Menoeceus 131:

“To grow accustomed therefore to simple and not luxurious diet gives us health to the full, and makes a man alert for the needful employments of life, and when after long intervals we approach luxuries disposes us better towards them, and fits us to be fearless of fortune.”

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of May 25, 2025 at 7:07 PM

### [Quote from Robert](#)

Habitual attachment to an unnecessary pleasure creates mental turmoil (and sometimes unpleasant bodily sensations as well, aka withdrawal symptoms).

Coffee...since it is easy to get and make at home, and just one-and-a-half cups a day in the morning feels like it creates mental sharpness for me. The caffeine addiction doesn't cause any mental turmoil.

So it is really depends on whether or not there are any bad consequences, and whether or not it is easy to get (and not expensive so that it does not deplete one's funds).

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## Post by “Patrikios” of May 26, 2025 at 10:05 AM

### [Quote from Robert](#)

Secondly, I was reading Voula Tsouna's chapter on Epicurean "therapies" (in her book on the ethics of Philodemus), which got me thinking about how we might view Epicureanism as a set of practices, as opposed to (simply) a set of views.

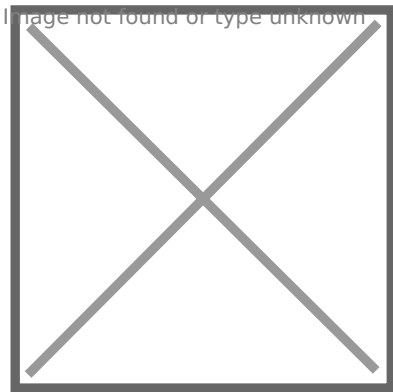
[@Eikadistes](#), I'm reminded of this distinction when you write that Epicurean teachings aren't "passing curiosities" but "practical guidance so we can confidently respond to the obstacles that characterize daily life." Also, your comments on memorization/recitation dovetail with what I just read in Sorabji's chapter (in *Emotion and Peace of Mind*) on Hellenistic spiritual exercises, as well as Hadot's discussion of same (in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*). Both authors point to memorization as a characteristic Epicurean practice.

[Robert](#), have you read Voula Tsouna's paper on **epibole**, where she talks about the process of how we should study and pay attention to the words and meanings of Epicurus writings.

[https://www.bsa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tsouna\\_310321\\_ABSTRACT-HANDOUT.pdf](https://www.bsa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tsouna_310321_ABSTRACT-HANDOUT.pdf)

In her paper on prolepsis, she emphasizes the role of mental focus in learning Epicurean concepts.

*"For what I label the Lockean view typically involves the idea that preconceptions are formed passively, without any movement of thought, whereas what I call the Kantian view is accompanied by the contention that **epibolē**, a mental focusing, is an integral component of the formation of basic concepts."*



### [Epicurean Preconceptions](#)

This paper provides a comprehensive study of the Epicurean theory of 'preconception'. It addresses what a preconception is; how our preconception of...  
[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

I find that understanding these concepts of **prolepsis** and **epibole** are key to better understanding how to integrate the simple, but powerful, practices of living prudently, pleasurably, and pleasantly.

## Post by “Patrikios” of May 26, 2025 at 6:31 PM

### [Quote from Patrikios](#)

“For what I label the Lockean view typically involves the idea that preconceptions are formed passively, without any movement of thought, whereas what I call the Kantian view is accompanied by the contention that epibolē, a mental focusing, is an integral component of the formation of basic concepts.”

According to [Epicurus' Letter to Herodotus](#) (37-38), students were instructed to actively focus their minds (epibolē) on the "indemonstrable starting points" (the core doctrines) so they could properly apply these principles in daily life. This mental focusing helped reinforce the preconceptions (prolēpsis) that developed naturally through experience.

What is fascinating is that Epicurus understood the functioning of our brain's reticular activating system (RAS). The RAS does indeed function similarly to how Epicureans described epibolē working. The RAS acts as a filtering system that brings relevant information to consciousness based on what we've programmed ourselves to consider important.

I find this comparison aligns remarkably well with Epicurean teaching methods.

1. The RAS, like epibolē, actively filters incoming information based on what we've trained ourselves to consider significant
2. When we consciously focus on Epicurean principles through epibolē, we're essentially programming the RAS to notice related patterns
3. The brain's "predictive mind" function works similarly to how Epicureans described the interaction between epibolē and prolepsis.

Do others here have a similar understanding of how to apply the principles of epibolē and prolēpsis to create a more pleasurable Epicurean practice?

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## Post by “Robert” of May 27, 2025 at 6:29 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I'm late to the game here, but I'd offer that philosophy - as conceived of in the ancient schools - was always meant to be lived. One chose a school (or took a more eclectic approach as I'd argue Cicero does in certain ways), and lived one's life in accordance with what one learned from one's teacher and one's school: Stoic, Peripatetic, Platonic, Skeptic, Epicurean, etc. As time went on, "religion" moved into that sphere - I'm thinking especially of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism (although some call that a philosophy - depends on the flavor I suppose), especially when those major religions got the imprimatur of government authority... like when the Roman emperor decided it would behoove him to have one emperor, one religion, one empire kind of thing. Later, philosophy became (in the popular and academic mind) a "subject" one studied apart from living one's life. In more recent time, the ancient schools - I'd argue spearheaded by "Stoics" (and, yes, I'm putting it deliberately in quotes) - have seen a revival of sorts, including [philosophical counseling](#). Our little corner of the internet is one of the ways Epicurus' philosophy is part of that renewal, revival, and renaissance.

Yes, it's the applied aspect that's been on my mind. Perhaps because we most often encounter philosophy as an academic subject, the province of scholars and historians, it can seem more like intellectual entertainment than an approach to living. And, as you point out, when folks today are interested in the question "how should I live?," religion is the go-to.

Just curious--could you elaborate further on your view of modern-day Stoics? I haven't delved into that corner of the philosophical world too much, other than listening to a few podcasts, but I'm interested to know where you see the divergences (from actual Stoicism). How well do you think modern-day Epicureans navigate the relationship with tradition--given that Epicureanism in classical times was said to value orthodoxy (to the point of not disagreeing with or criticizing the Hegemon), and yet there are obviously a few areas where rethinking is necessary, as in some parts of the physics.

### [Quote from Don](#)

As others have mentioned, Epicurus took part in commemorations (rituals) of his own birthday, his family's, his friends, and took part in the large city festivals regularly. I think you can also incorporate an Epicurean mindset when taking part in holidays - even if you attend church services as pro forma with family. Epicurus and the early Epicureans took part in rituals and processions and other civic affairs that paid homage and sacrifice to the gods; but I'm convinced they were not (mentally) taking part the way most in the crowds were participating. They saw the gods differently, but could take pleasure in the festivities and even the sacrifices which were a part of every civic festival. So, enjoy our (American) secular festivities like Thanksgiving, or

"religious/secular" events like Christmas.. but feel free to put your own Epicurean spin on things even its only to yourself.

I'm reminded of an interview I heard recently with a British actress who had grown up Catholic. She had lost her faith many years ago, but still loved the ceremonial aspects of Catholicism--indeed, she said it was her first introduction to theater. 😊

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## Post by “Don” of May 27, 2025 at 10:38 PM

### [Quote from Robert](#)

Just curious--could you elaborate further on your view of modern-day Stoics?

I will be honest to say I haven't delved too deeply into Stoicism. I flirted briefly with it, read Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (where I discovered this guy named Epicurus), read some articles on Stoicism, learned about Epictetus and his *Enchiridion*, discovered some more of their doctrines, then read *The Consolations of Philosophy* by Alain De Botton which led me to decide to dig into this Epicurean stuff. And I haven't looked back. I've read more about the Stoics after leaning more into Epicureanism.

When this topic comes up, I usually first point to Dr. Emily Austin's article [Are the Modern Stoics Really Epicureans?](#) In it, she makes the point that modern "Stoics" are closer to Epicureans than they are really to ancient students of the school. For example...

### Quote from Emily Austin

Marcus [Aurelius] objected to Epicurus' natural science and his advocacy of hedonism, the view that humans achieve tranquility through strategic pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. That sounds like two objections—natural science and hedonism—but it's really one. The Epicureans were intellectually-refined hedonists because of their science. ... Marcus rejected these Epicurean views whole-heartedly because he considered the divine creation of a providential universe essential to the Stoic project, as did other Roman Stoics like Epictetus and their Greek predecessors. For the Stoics, human rationality is a manifestation of God's generosity to humans, not a sophisticated animal capacity. Marcus insists that "the whole divine economy is pervaded by Providence." When he writes, "If not a wise Providence, then a jumble of atoms," he means to offer two options: "If not Stoicism, then Epicureanism." In fact, Marcus admits that if Epicurean natural science were right, he would fall into despair. Without

providence, he asks, "Why care about anything?"

The ancient Stoics believed in Providence, that every person's fate was already cast. Whatever happens to you is fated to happen. As Dr. Austin points out, the ancient Stoics believed that the universe was imbued with a divine providence. We face our suffering because it's part of a bigger plan, we were meant to suffer this pain we are undergoing. It's the classic "Everything happens for a reason." Which, I fervently believe, it does not.

Modern "Stoics," from what I have read, tend to downplay this idea of Providence, of divine will, directing their lives. But you can't have your muscular Stoic fortitude without the Providence. That's not Stoicism, at least not in the classical, ancient sense. There are some classical Stoics nowadays that keep their Providential underpinnings, but they appear to be a minority.

Another thing that turned me off Stoicism was the idea that even if your child dies, you should treat that loss no different than you would the loss of a drinking cup. There are nuances, but, that's basically what they're saying. Epictetus writes:

#### [Quote from Epictetus Discourses](#)

Do not attach yourself to them and they will not be necessary: do not say to yourself that they are necessary, and then they are not necessary.

This study you ought to practice from morning to evening, beginning with the smallest things and those most liable to damage, with an earthen pot, with a cup. Then proceed in this way to a tunic, to a little dog, to a horse, to a small estate in land: then to yourself, to your body, to the parts of your body, to your children, to your wife, to your brothers. Look all round and throw these things from you (which are not yours). Purge your opinions, so that nothing cleave to you of the things which are not your own, that nothing grow to you, that nothing give you pain when it is torn from you

Basically, be unattached to everything external to yourself, from a cup to your children, wife, brothers. Be completely unattached to all of them so that "nothing can give you pain when it is torn from you." That is, if your cup is broken or your wife dies. That doesn't even sound human to me.

Epicurus and other Epicurean writers write that we will feel grief when someone dies. They also write that we shouldn't let grief overcome us, but grief will sting and be painful. We should focus on the memories of our dead friends and family and take pleasure in the time you had together. That seems a much more human response to loss.

That's a taste of why I'm not a Stoic and where I think most modern Stoics paper over the actual tenets of their philosophy to make it more palatable to a modern audience. There's also the issues brought up in [Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age](#) by

Donna Zuckerberg but that's for another post.

I'll address your other question in the next post.

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## Post by “Don” of May 27, 2025 at 10:55 PM

### [Quote from Robert](#)

How well do you think modern-day Epicureans navigate the relationship with tradition-- given that Epicureanism in classical times was said to value orthodoxy (to the point of not disagreeing with or criticizing the Hegemon), and yet there are obviously a few areas where rethinking is necessary, as in some parts of the physics.

As you may be able to tell from my last post, I think the modern-day Epicureans don't have nearly the level of problems the modern-day Stoics have in keeping closer to the ancient school. I've read the complaints about the Epicurean school having to do with their being dogmatic or not disagreeing with the teacher. I'd have to look up where those came from, so I won't discuss specifics. Part of this from modern commentators it seems to me has to do with being hung up on the word "dogmatic" itself. "Epicureans were dogmatic," as in Diogenes Laertius 10.120: "He will be a dogmatist but not a mere sceptic." I addressed this on my site: <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...remain-in-doubt> Dogmatic doesn't mean keeping to strict orthodoxy, it means being willing to take a position as opposed to remaining skeptical of everything, or as the word used means, "to be at a loss, be in doubt, be puzzled."

When it comes to the physics, I'm not overly concerned about the specifics. The Lucretius Today podcast did a great job of working through the letters to [Herodotus](#) and [Pythocles](#) and mining those for some great practical insights! The specifics don't matter. What matters is that Epicurus taught that we live in a material universe, governed by understandable laws that can be known; where we lack sufficient evidence for a conclusion, we withhold judgement and accept that there's a material cause until sufficient evidence is available. We are not ruled by Providence as the Stoics would have us believe. If you read the letters to Herodotus and Pythocles or sections of Lucretius, Epicurus and Lucretius are constantly writing "it could be this way, or this way, or this way..." and accept that there's a physical cause for the phenomenon they're discussing. Lucian in "Alexander the Oracle-Monger" writes that an Epicurean could find the physical mechanism behind the Snake-Oracle even if wasn't readily apparent.

That unswerving commitment that we live in a physical world, not under the thumb of capricious gods, is what makes it possible to be a modern-day Epicurean.

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## Post by “Robert” of May 28, 2025 at 12:01 AM

### [Quote from Patrikios](#)

[Robert](#) , have you read Voula Tsouna's paper on **epibole**, where she talks about the process of how we should study and pay attention to the words and meanings of Epicurus writings.

<https://www.bsa.ac.uk/wp-content/upl...ACT-HANDOUT.pdf>

In her paper on prolepsis, she emphasizes the role of mental focus in learning Epicurean concepts.

*“For what I label the Lockean view typically involves the idea that preconceptions are formed passively, without any movement of thought, whereas what I call the Kantian view is accompanied by the contention that **epibolē**, a mental focusing, is an integral component of the formation of basic concepts.”*

[https://www.academia.edu/32563844/Epicurean\\_Preconceptions](https://www.academia.edu/32563844/Epicurean_Preconceptions)

I find that understanding these concepts of **prolepsis** and **epibole** are key to better understanding how to integrate the simple, but powerful, practices of living prudently, pleasurably, and pleasantly.

Hi, Patrikios--I just finished reading the paper on epibole--thank you for suggesting it! A quick reaction (assuming I understood Tsouna's line of argument) is that it sheds some light on *why* memorization of the teachings is important. It seems to form part of a mental training that leads first to epibole about specific topics and ultimately to the cosmic-level view that Lucretius and Philodemus both attribute to the the Epicurean sage. Does this seem correct to you?

I'm going to dive into the paper on prolepsis next, as this is a concept I've had trouble grasping. It's interesting that epibole and prolepsis are both so integral to your Epicurean practice(s)--interesting because they're both a bit difficult, and are part of the canon rather than the ethics (which seems to be the most accessible part of the philosophy).

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## Post by “Robert” of May 28, 2025 at 12:38 AM

## [Quote from Don](#)

### [Quote from Robert](#)

How well do you think modern-day Epicureans navigate the relationship with tradition--given that Epicureanism in classical times was said to value orthodoxy (to the point of not disagreeing with or criticizing the Hegemon), and yet there are obviously a few areas where rethinking is necessary, as in some parts of the physics.

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That unswerving commitment that we live in a physical world, not under the thumb of capricious gods, is what makes it possible to be a modern-day Epicurean.

Hi, Don,

The Stoic reliance of Providence was a turn-off for me as well--probably the main issue that drew me away from it, after some initial interest. More specifically, I don't think the Stoics handled theodicy very convincingly. They actually seem to me even less plausible than the Abrahamic religions in that regard. Plus, if one's going to accept a notion like Providence, why not go a step further and personalize it--make it a God you can talk to?

Since, as Emily Austin suggests, modern-day Stoics are closer to Epicureanism, I wonder why they self-describe as the former. Something to do with Marcus Aurelius? Or maybe--at least in the U.S.--the concept of "pleasure" conflicts too much with the Protestant work ethic?

Regarding Epicurean physics, I did hear this covered in the Lucretius Today episodes dealing with relevant sections of *De Rerum Natura*. I'm very interested in listening to the other episodes that you mention.

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### Post by "Cassius" of May 28, 2025 at 6:58 AM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

I've read the complaints about the Epicurean school having to do with their being dogmatic or not disagreeing with the teacher.

I'd have to look back too to really be sure, but I am thinking that some of this criticism is included in Nussbaum's pro-Stoic "Therapy of Desire." I'm not a fan of that book but if someone were looking for that criticism, which I think is totally unfounded, that's one place I would look.

As to Stoicism, other issues in addition to divine order, plus a belief in life after death (so you start off violating Epicurus' first two doctrines right there) are their emphasis on logic over feeling/sensation and their dismissal of pleasure.

In my case I got interested in Stoicism due to high school and college courses in Latin, and my general impression (which I now see to be false) that Cicero was a Stoic. Aside from Cicero's willingness to enlist the Stoics in his defense of Virtue, Cicero delivers a strong take-down of Stoicism in one of the latter chapters of his "On Ends."

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### Post by "Cassius" of May 28, 2025 at 1:50 PM

Robert I am working on this week's podcast and included within the section we read is this from Cicero attacking the Stoics in [Part2 Section XII of Tusculan Disputations](#):

Here's the intro:

Quote

Therefore, you allowed enough when you admitted that infamy appeared to you to be a greater evil than pain. And if you abide by this admission, you will see how far pain should be resisted: and that our inquiry should be not so much whether pain be an evil; as how the mind may be fortified for resisting it.

**And here's Cicero's attack that I wanted to cite. This quote is useful in many contexts to show the difference between the Stoics and Epicurus, or between the Stoics and anyone who uses common sense rather than word games.**

Quote

***The Stoics infer from some petty quibbling arguments, that it is no evil, as if the dispute was about a word, and not about the thing itself. Why do you impose upon me, Zeno? for when you deny what appears very dreadful to me to be an evil; I am deceived, and am at a loss to know why that which appears to me to be a most miserable thing, should be no evil. The answer is, that nothing is an evil but what is base and vicious. You return to your trifling, for you do not remove what made me uneasy. I know that pain is not vice,—you need not inform me of that: but show me, that it makes no difference to me whether I am in pain or not. It has never anything to do, say you, with a happy life, for that depends upon virtue alone; but yet pain is to be avoided. If I ask, why? it is disagreeable, against nature, hard to bear, woful and afflicting. Here are many words to express that by so many different forms, which we call by the single word, evil. You are defining pain, instead of removing it, when you say, it is disagreeable, unnatural, scarcely possible to be endured or borne: nor are you wrong in saying so; but the man who vaunts himself in such a manner should not give way in his conduct, if it be true that nothing is good but what is honest, and nothing evil but what is disgraceful. This would be wishing, not proving.***

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**Post by “Patrikios” of May 28, 2025 at 2:09 PM**

### [Quote from Robert](#)

Hi, Patrikios--I just finished reading the paper on epibole--thank you for suggesting it! A quick reaction (assuming I understood Tsouna's line of argument) is that it sheds some light on why memorization of the teachings is important. It seems to form part of a mental training that leads first to epibole about specific topics and ultimately to the cosmic-level view that Lucretius and Philodemus both attribute to the the Epicurean sage. Does this seem correct to you?

[Robert](#) , yes, you summarized my current understanding of the practical applications of epibole and prolapses to the Epicurean education process. After reading those papers by **Voula Tsouna**, I found that studying the Key Doctrines in short groups of 3 or 4 related doctrines was more beneficial to focus on a key topic. But I was having trouble just memorizing each KD, so I found by also reading different translations and when I allowed the words to generate feelings, those sensations brought up images or recollections related to the doctrine. In this way, we are programming our unconscious (the RAS, etc.) by employing the epibole to begin focusing the full mind which then correlates the words with feelings and images that are meaningful from your personal experience.

Would you call this immersive or whole-brain learning that was being taught in Epicurean schools?

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## **Post by “Cassius” of May 28, 2025 at 2:24 PM**

### [Quote from Patrikios](#)

I found that studying the Key Doctrines in short groups of 3 or 4 related doctrines was more beneficial to focus on a key topic.

[Don](#) do we or you have a page or listing somewhere that breaks the PDs down not by number but by related paragraph and/or topic? I know we've discussed this many times but i am not sure I have seen a polished and formatted version. I am sure that there are many possible divisions but we might as well be helpful to people and suggest one or two.

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## **Post by “Don” of May 28, 2025 at 2:43 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

I found that studying the Key Doctrines in short groups of 3 or 4 related doctrines was more beneficial to focus on a key topic.

[Don](#) do we or you have a page or listing somewhere that breaks the PDs down not by number but by related paragraph and/or topic? I know we've discussed this many times but i am not sure I have seen a polished and formatted version. I am sure that there are many possible divisions but we might as well be helpful to people and suggest one or two.

Good question. Surely somewhere on this forum.

Try this thread:

Post

[\*\*RE: What if Kyriai Doxai was NOT a list?\*\*](#)

[...]

codex Laurentianus Plut.69.35 - written 1101-1200 CE (12 century CE)

<http://mss.bmlonline.it/s.aspx?Id=AWOI...ogenes#/oro/496>

[Principal Doctrines](#) start on folio 243v, 10 lines from the bottom on the left side.

The oldest I could find.

[...]

Oh, yeah. There are at least 3 more I want to look at that have no numbers. Plus there are the Latin translations. I've only just started!



Don

July 21, 2023 at 7:56 AM

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**Post by “Cassius” of May 28, 2025 at 4:03 PM**

Ok so I see this post is perhaps closest but we don't really have one.

Post

**RE: What if Kyriai Doxai was NOT a list?**

Following up on [a post of mine from Cassius' thread about PDs in narrative form](#) on a list of 44 PDs in a 1739 Greek/Latin translation:

I used a 1739 Greek with Latin translation to compare with the text at Perseus Digital Library:

1739: <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nn...id=27021597768674761-1400>

Perseus Greek (DL, Book 10): <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/h...3Abook%3D10%3Achapter%3D1>

Perseus English (DL, Book 10): <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/h...3Abook%3D10%3Achapter%3D1>

I used the Greek text to compare...



Don

August 2, 2023 at 12:00 AM

Some of them clearly belong together (on canonics, on justice, for example) but others are more flexible or the topics are shorter. If anyone has re-divided them already and wants to suggest an arrangement I can put up a page, but I'll label it clearly that we're just doing our best and there doesn't seem to be anything in the Greek to which we can point as definitive way to divide them

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**Post by "Pacatus" of May 29, 2025 at 1:09 PM**

[Quote from Don](#)

Dogmatic doesn't mean keeping to strict orthodoxy, it means being willing to take a position as opposed to remaining skeptical of everything, or as the word used means, "to be at a loss, be in doubt, be puzzled."

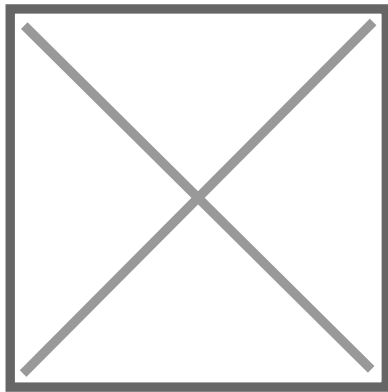


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**Post by “Pacatus” of May 29, 2025 at 1:44 PM**

In looking up Tsouna’s essays cited above by Patrikios, I stumbled on this paper (a master’s thesis) on an “Epicurean Theory of the Mind.” I have not yet read it (and likely will do so in my usual slow, piecemeal fashion 😊). But I thought it might be interesting ...

Didn’t know the proper place to put it, so just stuck it here ...



[Epicurean Theory of Mind](#)

It has been argued that Epicurus was a reductionist with regard to the mind. It has also been argued that Epicurus is a non-reductionist with regard to the...

[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)