

The dark Epicureanism in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Post by "Stan85" of May 24, 2018 at 10:57 PM

I've mentioned in another thread that the Epicurean philosophy strikes me as deeply pessimistic. I think this pessimism is brought out beautifully in Edward Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: <http://classics.mit.edu/Khayyam/rubaiyat.html>

Sure, Khayyam may not be an orthodox Epicurean, but his attack on the theistic or conventional judgments and his praise of simple pleasures are in complete conformity with Epicureanism. Yet unlike, say, Lucretius, his tone is distinctly somber. Rather than liberation from the false values of the herd, the subtext here seems to be disillusionment and skepticism.

The following verses seem to be of particular relevance for Epicureanism:

Quote

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,

A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread--and Thou

Beside me singing in the Wilderness--

Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Some for the Glories of This World; and some

Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come;

Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go,

Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!

And those who husbanded the Golden grain,

And those who flung it to the winds like Rain,

Alike to no such aureate Earth are turn'd

As, buried once, Men want dug up again.

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes--or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face,
Lighting a little hour or two--is gone.

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way.

Alike for those who for To-day prepare,
And those that after some To-morrow stare,
A Muezzin from the Tower of Darkness cries
"Fools! your Reward is neither Here nor There."

Why, all the Saints and Sages who discuss'd
Of the Two Worlds so wisely--they are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth; their Words to Scorn
Are scatter'd, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust.

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument

About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door where in I went.

With them the seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with mine own hand wrought to make it grow;
And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd--
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

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It would be interesting to compare orthodox Epicureanism with the worldview suggested by these lines.

Post by “Cassius” of May 25, 2018 at 4:45 AM

I have not studied the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam so my comments can only be brief and tentative. I suspect [Hiram](#) has so maybe he will have more comment.

But if his primary parallel to Epicurus is "his attack on the theistic or conventional judgments and his praise of simple pleasures" then we would want to explore his views on physics and epistemology as those are critical to any conclusions about ethics.

Post by “Hiram” of May 29, 2018 at 1:46 PM

Ecclesiastes in the Bible is also deeply pessimistic and shows some Epicurean influence (the Epicureans were a major school in Antioch and in the vicinity of Judea when it was written), but it can't ultimately be reconciled with E for its claim that all wisdom begins with fear of God.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 7, 2022 at 6:13 PM

The following is from Wikipedia:

"FitzGerald emphasized the religious skepticism he found in Omar Khayyam.^[10] In his preface to the *Rubáiyát*, he describes Omar's philosophy as [Epicurean](#) and claims that Omar was "hated and dreaded by the Sufis,..."

Quote

The extreme popularity of FitzGerald's work led to a prolonged debate on the correct interpretation of the philosophy behind the poems. FitzGerald emphasized the religious skepticism he found in Omar Khayyam.^[10] In his preface to the *Rubáiyát*, he describes Omar's philosophy as [Epicurean](#) and claims that Omar was "hated and dreaded by the Sufis, whose practice he ridiculed and whose faith amounts to little more than his own when stripped of the Mysticism and formal recognition of Islamism under which Omar would not hide".^[11] [Richard Nelson Frye](#) also emphasizes that Khayyam was despised by a number of prominent contemporary Sufis. These include figures such as [Shams Tabrizi](#), [Najm al-Din Daya](#), [Al-Ghazali](#), and [Attar](#), who "viewed Khayyam not as a fellow-mystic, but a free-thinking scientist".^[7]: 663–664 The skeptic interpretation is supported by the medieval historian [Al-Qifti](#) (ca. 1172–1248), who in his *The History of Learned Men* reports that Omar's poems were only outwardly in the Sufi style but were written with an anti-religious agenda. He also mentions that Khayyam was indicted for impiety and went on a [pilgrimage](#) to avoid punishment.^[12]



Omar Khayyam, painting by [Adelaide Hanscom](#) (c. 1910).

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 7, 2022 at 6:31 PM

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam [excerpt]

[Edward Fitzgerald](#)

1

Wake! For the Sun, who scattered into flight
The Stars before him from the Field of Night,
Drives Night along with them from Heav'n and strikes
The Sultán's Turret with a Shaft of Light.

2

Before the phantom of False morning died,
Methought a Voice within the Tavern cried,
"When all the Temple is prepared within,
Why nods the drowsy Worshiper outside?"

3

And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted--"Open, then, the Door!
You know how little while we have to stay,
And, once departed, may return no more."

12

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread--and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

13

Some for the Glories of This World; and some

Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come;
Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go,
Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!

14

Look to the blowing Rose about us--"Lo,
Laughing," she says, "into the world I blow,
At once the silken tassel of my Purse
Tear, and its Treasure on the Garden throw."

15

And those who husbanded the Golden Grain,
And those who flung it to the winds like Rain,
Alike to no such aureate Earth are turned
As, buried once, Men want dug up again.

19

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears
Dropped in her Lap from some once lovely Head.

20

And this reviving Herb whose tender Green
Fledges the River-Lip on which we lean--
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen!

21

Ah, my Belovéd, fill the Cup that clears

Today of past Regrets and future Fears:

Tomorrow!--Why, Tomorrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n thousand Years.

22

For some we loved, the loveliest and the best
That from his Vintage rolling Time hath pressed,
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,
And one by one crept silently to rest.

23

And we, that now make merry in the Room
They left, and Summer dresses in new bloom,
Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth
Descend--ourselves to make a Couch--for whom?

24

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and--sans End!

71

The Moving Finger writes, and, having writ,
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

72

And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,

Whereunder crawling cooped we live and die,

Lift not your hands to It for help--for It

As impotently moves as you or I.

[The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam \[excerpt\] by Edward Fitzgerald - Poems | poets.org](#)

Post by “Pacatus” of May 10, 2022 at 2:29 PM

"A book of verses underneath the bough,
a jug of wine, a loaf of bread--and thou
beside me singing in the wilderness--

Oh, wilderness were paradise enow!"

This was a treasured statement of our philosophy when my wife and I lived a more simple life (for 15 years) in what I called our "widly garden": growing vegetables in the kitchen garden, cutting and splitting wood for winter, planting fruit trees, gathering blackberries and wild cherries -- and my wife's homemade wine. Doesn't seem pessimistic at all to me.

But, re the Khayyam quote, I always thought Epicurus might have quipped: "Why are you in a wilderness? Are their no civilized gardens around?" 😊

Post by “Pacatus” of December 1, 2023 at 5:16 PM

Edward Fitzgerald himself thought of Khayyam as an Epicurean (as [Kalosyni](#) noted above) rather than a Sufi, like Rumi or Hafiz; and rejected the notion that Omar's references to wine (for example) ought to be spiritualized - in spite of attempts to do so. Omar was influenced by Lucretius, though his own poetry was more lyric than narrative-didactic (though the lessons are there).

"Khayyam is famous for having sort of Epicurean themes in his poems and meditations on mortality and death and how to live a life that is meaningful ... in the face of uncertainly, really, and mortality and temporality." Austin O'Malley (scholar of classical Persian, University of Arizona)

Omar's references to God can be taken as (sometimes humorously) metaphorical in many ways - but definitely not as a divine persona that meddles in human affairs.

Fitzgerald's renderings have been criticized by academics - but one is hard-pressed to find a translation equal in lyric profundity (at least in my limited experience).

At bottom, I do not find Khayyam (or Epicurus) to be pessimistic at all - and suppose that those who do, find anything outside the comfort-zone of idealism (religious or philosophical) somehow pessimistic to them.

Post by "Cassius" of December 2, 2023 at 6:27 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

But, re the Khayyam quote, I always thought Epicurus might have quipped: "Why are you in a wilderness? Are there no civilized gardens around?" 😊

That reminds me of this:

[Quote from Thus Spake Zarathustra](#)

Here, however, did Zarathustra interrupt the foaming fool, and shut his mouth.—

Stop this at once! called out Zarathustra, long have thy speech and thy species disgusted me!

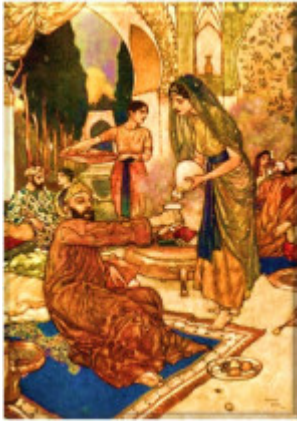
Why didst thou live so long by the swamp, that thou thyself hadst to become a frog and a toad?

Floweth there not a tainted, frothy, swamp-blood in thine own veins, when thou hast thus learned to croak and revile?

Why wentest thou not into the forest? Or why didst thou not till the ground? Is the sea not full of green islands?

Post by "Pacatus" of May 7, 2024 at 3:18 PM

After Khayyam



*“And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted—'Open then the Door.
You know how little while we have to stay,
And, once departed, may return no more.”*

– Omar Khayyam, Rubaiyat III, translated by Edward Fitzgerald (from his First Edition)

~ ~ ~

And so, to the tavern at dawn make haste,
that lively vintage tapped this morn to taste –
for yesterday's run dry, tomorrow's fruit
unpres't – and deign not this hour sour to waste

whilst wishing what mayest thou savor when
fortune's flavors favor your taste buds' ken,
from imagining and memory bruit:
fancies and dreams – once dreamt, must drowse again.

The past draught, once drunk, shall be drawn no more;
and next year's sherry – yet to bloom with flor,
in oaken casks to ferment – still, doth wait.
This day's quick wine thus quaff, while it may pour –

and lose not thyself in portentous lore;
nor scorn merry mirth, vain creeds to adore.

+++++

“flor” – a yeast that is used in the production of sherry (from Spanish for flower).

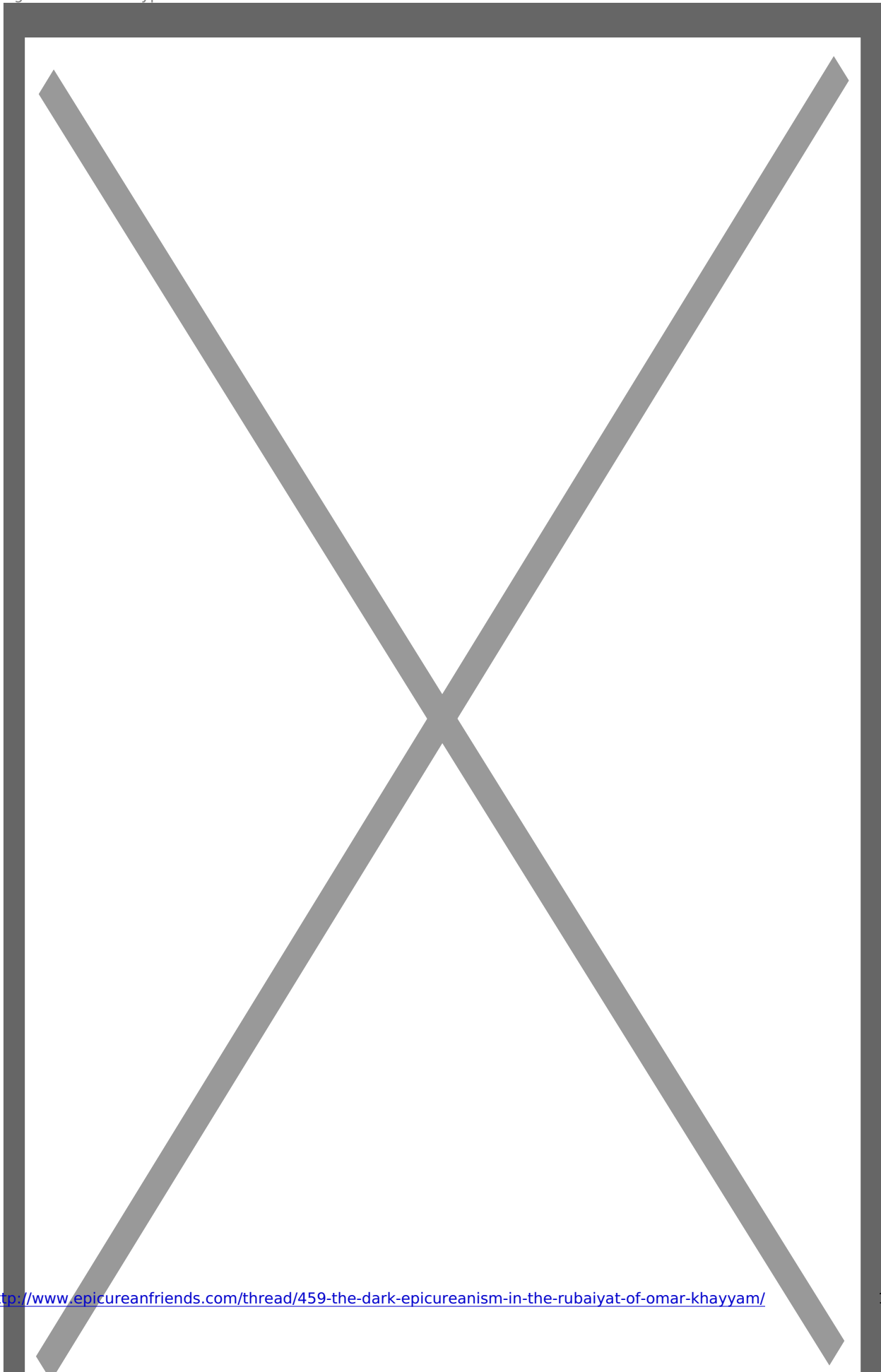
Written in the form of Edward Fitzgerald's quatrains (except for the closing couplet).

Image from an illustration by Edmund Dulac from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, 1909

Post by "Kalosyni" of May 7, 2024 at 6:53 PM

[Pacatus](#) ...just this morning I found a 1947 edition in the attic and this link shows what it is, and it is illustrated by Mahmoud Sayah:

Image not found or type unknown



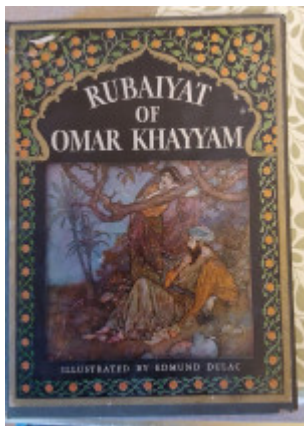
[Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam by Omar, Khayyam, Edward Fitzgerald on Blind Horse Books](#)

New York: Random House, 1947. Mahmoud Sayah. Hardcover. Translated into English Quatrains by Edward Fitzgerald, a complete reprint of the first edition and the...
www.blindhorsebooks.com

Now I will be able to read real pages...and can verify what parts are Epicurean!

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 16, 2026 at 2:44 PM

I just found a second book in the attic! (published in 1937 with illustrations by Edmund Dulac).



I asked Google the following question:

Did Edward Fitzgerald make mistakes when he translated the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam?

AI Overview:

Yes, Edward FitzGerald made numerous, intentional, and often admitted "mistakes" (or rather, liberties) when he translated

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Rather than a strict, literal translation, FitzGerald created a "transmogrification" or "tessellation" of the original Persian quatrains, resulting in a work that is more of an English classic inspired by Khayyam than a direct translation.

Here are the specific ways FitzGerald diverged from the original:

1. Misreadings and Translation Errors

- **Literal Failures:** Critics and scholars, including E.B. Cowell (who taught Persian to FitzGerald), noted that FitzGerald occasionally struggled with the language, leading to

direct errors in understanding the original text.

- **Opposite Meanings:** In some instances, FitzGerald misunderstood the Persian so completely that he made Khayyam say the exact opposite of what was written.
- **Misread Words:** Scholars have pointed out that he occasionally misread words, such as mistaking *mānam* (I remain) for *mātam* (grief/tears), which changed the meaning of the verse.

2. Intentional Alterations ("Transmogrification")

- **"Mashed" Quatrains:** FitzGerald combined lines from different, separate quatrains to create a new, cohesive poem.
- **Invented Verses:** Several stanzas in the *Rubaiyat* do not exist in the Persian original and were invented by FitzGerald himself.
- **Refusal to Correct:** When informed of errors by his mentor, Cowell, FitzGerald sometimes refused to correct them because he felt his version fit the "spirit" of the poem better.
- **Changed Tone:** FitzGerald turned what was sometimes a, at times, pessimistic or philosophical, at times, mystical original into a more consistently hedonistic, "carpe diem" ("seize the day") narrative that resonated with Victorian skeptics.

3. Cultural and Ideological Differences

- **Sufi vs. Skeptic:** While the original Persian often features spiritual, Sufi, or mystical undertones, FitzGerald's version downplays this in favor of a secular, skeptical, and Epicurean tone.
- **Interpretation of the "Saki":** The "Thou" or "Saki" (cup-bearer) in the original, who is often a young, budding male, was interpreted by FitzGerald in a way that fit the romanticized, often slightly homoerotic tone common in some Victorian intellectual circles, rather than the original cultural context.

Conclusion:

While FitzGerald did make technical, linguistic mistakes, his biggest "mistakes" were, by his own admission, intentional, aimed at creating a poetic masterpiece rather than a dictionary translation. The resulting *Rubaiyat* is widely recognized as a "transcreation" that is more of a 19th-century English masterpiece than a literal 11th-century Persian one.

Post by "Kalosyni" of February 16, 2026 at 4:21 PM

It is important to see that there are a number of differences between Epicurean philosophy and the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam...and the *Rubaiyat* takes a dark and pessimistic tone.

Labeling Epicurean philosophy as pessimistic is incorrect (rebuttal to post #1 above) and there are enough large differences between Epicureanism and the Rubaiyat that we should not label the Rubaiyat as Epicurean.

Here is short comparison and then a full table of comparison follows. (source: Google AI):

Epicureanism and the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (particularly in Edward FitzGerald's famous translation) share a "carpe diem" spirit that emphasizes seizing the present moment. However, they differ significantly in their underlying tone: while Epicureanism is a structured system for achieving tranquility (*ataraxia*), the *Rubaiyat* is often viewed as a more somber, skeptical exploration of life's transience and the perceived silence of the divine.

| Feature | Epicurean Philosophy | The <i>Rubaiyat</i> (FitzGerald) |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Primary Goal | Ataraxia: Absolute peace and the absence of mental/physical pain. | Carpe Diem: Finding immediate joy (often symbolized by wine) in a fleeting life. |
| View of the Divine | Gods exist but are indifferent and do not interfere in human affairs. | The Divine is mysterious, silent, or even arbitrary/unjust in the face of suffering. |
| Attitude Toward Death | " Death is nothing to us "; the soul is material and ceases to exist. | Death is a "final and unyielding reality" that turns us back into clay/dust. |
| Source of Pleasure | Refined, simple pleasures; friendship and intellectual pursuit over decadence. | Sensuous and symbolic pleasures; often uses wine and love as a refuge from existential dread. |
| Moral Outlook | Rational and empirical; based on understanding the natural laws of atoms and void. | Skeptical and agnostic; questions the efficacy of religious or philosophical "certainty". |
| Tone | Didactic and liberating: A system meant to free followers from fear. | Somber and fatalistic: Reflects "disillusionment" and the "temporality of human existence". |

Edit note: In the table under "primary goal" it says ataraxia, and we must be sure to understand it through the lens of [PD10](#) - "If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life."

Post by “kochiekoch” of February 16, 2026 at 8:19 PM

From what you write, Fitzgeralds Rubaiyat sounds more Cyrenaic than Epicurean or, I'll bet Sufi.



A more Victorian Skeptic view than what Omar Khayyam actually wrote?