

What Epicurus Offers To The Modern World As Of April, 2024?

Post by “Don” of April 27, 2024 at 11:39 PM

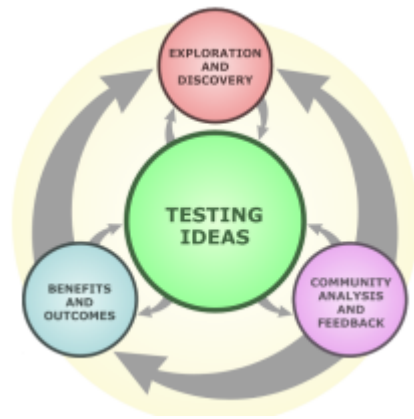
[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Despite the school encouraged the study of nature, which is as 'scientific' approach as it possibly could be at the time, the same school attracted people with unscientific, pious, almost cult like behaviour towards Epicurus and his teachings putting him in a weird position of some kind of a saviour, god or something like that. I called it a concealed ideology as I suspect something I don't know, or understand, was going on behind the scenes. On top of that, what was completely on display, also leaves me scratching my head sometimes. (yes, I'm thinking 'the real gods' in intermundia, for example). Materialistic school with pious students? Eternal gods made of matter? I guess you can cook a duck and duck a cook at the same time but it's kinda weird 😊

I'm not trying to belittle Epicureanism in any way, I simply try to understand what ancient Epicureanism was really like.

I think you raise some interesting and valid points, [TauPhi](#) . I appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts and to give anyone interested a chance to add to the discussion.

My first thought as I read your post was: Although we can see "scientific" precursors in ancient Greek philosophy, they weren't *really* doing science. To me, science as a discipline has specific techniques and ways of experimenting and collecting data. The University of California Berkeley hosts a website, [Understanding Science 101](#), which says: "all science relies on testing ideas by figuring out what expectations are generated by an idea and making observations to find out whether those expectations hold true. Accepted scientific ideas are reliable because they have been subjected to rigorous testing. But, as new evidence is acquired and new perspectives emerge, these ideas can be revised." They also have a nice diagram that shows the nonlinear "[process of science](#)"



Neither Democritus nor Epicurus nor Aristotle nor any other ancient Greek or Roman really followed a scientific process. I think they contributed to the lineage that would eventually lead to science as a discipline, but they didn't "do science." They tried their best to make sense of the natural world around them (*Exploration and Discovery* in the diagram?). However, they didn't try to get feedback or analysis. They maybe tested their ideas in a rudimentary way but certainly didn't run experiments. They gathered the facts as best they could and, through introspection, "thought experiments," and elimination of possible causes (in their limited understanding) came up with the best explanation. Now, that said, i think Epicurus came up with some of the best explanations *for his time*. His intuition and personal introspective analysis was closer to right than wrong more often than not... that's why we're here discussing Epicurean philosophy 2,300+ years later. We feel it still has value millennia later. But he still got a number of things wildly incorrect when measured against modern scientific understanding.

Do I think Epicurus would change his mind about some of his ideas given a chance to learn modern explanations? Sure. He can be applauded for getting it right, but that "getting it right" is relative to all the other explanations out there at the time. He was a novel thinker, and maybe he was closer to right more often than not because everyone else had come up with bad ideas (to which he was responding) and with which Epicurus didn't agree. He wanted a better solution, and it just so happens that his alternative solutions were closer (certainly not exact) to how we understand the world now... by virtue of being opposed to the common knowledge of his day. That doesn't take anything away from the value of his writings nor does it make light of his contribution to helping others - well past his lifetime - live a more productive and happy life.

Okay, so that's Epicurus getting his study of nature right even though he wasn't doing science as we think of it... his approach was at least science-adjacent or pre-scientific.

Did Epicurus structure the Garden as a cult to himself? *Well...* He did institute the celebration of his birthday during his lifetime. He did institute the 20th celebration each month as a celebration of himself and Metrodorus... like the other monthly celebrations of the gods like Apollo, Aphrodite, etc. The question would have to be asked if he instituted those celebrations at the request of his students or did his student request to celebrate him and he provided a structure for them. From the texts, especially the fragments (and larger sections) of *On Nature*,

Epicurus was definitely THE LEADER of his school and the one who wrote a 37-volume lecture course with HIM as the lecturer. There's also "Honoring a wise one is itself a great good to the one who honors." (ὁ τοῦ σοφοῦ σεβασμὸς ἀγαθὸν μέγα τῷ σεβομένῳ ἐστί.) The word used there means "to be moved by awe, fear, or respect for others or for their opinions;" and can also be used in a religious sense as honoring a god; to revere; to worship. Epicurus didn't seem to discourage this kind of respect, awe, etc.; however, he also reciprocated from time to time (IF I remember correctly). He also practiced this reverencing/honoring in relation to the gods himself in his participation in the rites and festivals, both in the Garden and in the city. It was a natural result of this "honoring the wise one" that he was basically deified after his death... he wasn't around to stop his students from doing it ("Do all things as if Epicurus were watching.") But I think [Cassius](#) made a good observation in an earlier post that the [Epicurean gods](#) didn't interfere in human affairs. It's metaphor at least. And "true piety" is showing respect/awe for the correct reasons as opposed to showing respect/awe out of fear for divine punishment or desire for divine gifts.

Calling Epicurus a "savior" or "god" as Lucretius does, honestly, doesn't really bother me... as long as I interpret it metaphorically. Epicurus "literally" "saved" people from ignorance and fear. That makes him, by definition, a savior.

As for the gods... I'm *still* not convinced that Epicurus believed there were giant humanoids living between world-systems, replenishing their atoms continuously.

All that is another reason I don't think we'll ever recreate the Garden as the Garden was during Epicurus's time or during it's existence into the Roman era. We do NOT know nor can we know (without some wondrous trove of semi-complete papyri coming out of the new Herculaneum scroll-reading technology!) how the life of the Garden functioned and how students were recruited, taught, housed, etc. We have NO real idea what ceremonies were involved in the 20th celebrations. We have no idea how demanding Epicurus was in showing him (and Metrodorus and Hermarchus and Polyaeus) "reverence and awe." We really don't know how the practice of parrhesia (frank criticism) was carried out, although Philodemus (writing a century-and-a-half after Epicurus) does provide an invaluable text on that. There is too much we don't know.

What we do know - and what we have - is a systematic way of looking at the world and of living one's life to the fullest in pursuit of eudaimonia. I still think the substance of Epicurus's philosophy has something to say in the modern world. In some ways, I see our attempt at applying a 2-1/2 millennia old philosophy to our own lives as akin to the efforts by some "[secular Buddhists](#)" to rid that philosophy of its supernatural and religious accretions and apply it to their lives. With all respect to [Cassius](#) (and I know why he says it! and kudos for that), we're all in some ways "[neo-Epicureans](#)." There's no way we can really be "classical Epicureans" in every sense of that phrase. For me, we're trying to stay true to the "spirit" of Epicurean philosophy without being beholden to the "letter" of Epicurean philosophy.

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I am an eclectic (and an Epicurean friend at the same time) and it works for me.

And if it works, that's what's important. You're getting pleasure from your search and your path. 😊 Who knows? I may end up walking the path of the eclectic in the future again. It's certainly been a long and winding road to get to the Garden Path: Christian Mystic, "Druid," Buddhist, etc... I've had various descriptions of the path I was on before I got here. So far... I like the view from the Garden and plan to put my feet up and enjoy a cold beverage for awhile.

I'll end by saying I enjoy your company here and appreciate your willingness to engage in friendly discussion and to challenge from time to time. That opportunity to think through some issues is very helpful.

PS. Oh my! That ended up way longer than I intended. Mea culpa.