

# Social Media Considered Anti-Epicurean: 101 Reasons Why

Post by "Julia" of October 21, 2024 at 11:40 PM

"I have never wished to cater to the crowd; for what I know, they do not approve, and what they approve, I do not know." - Epicurus (Seneca's Letters, Book I, Letter XXIX)

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In this post, I'd like to outline my view that social media, as it is understood today, can be considered inherently and invariably Anti-Epicurean.[1] To be clear, I do *not* intend to offer a balanced treatise on the subject, but to offer my own, opinionated position. I feel this is justified, considering that enough has already been said and implied in modern culture to enthrall us with social media's alleged blessings. My goal, therefore, is to help anyone who is willing to reevaluate that, to help anyone who wants to [put social media into perspective](#) by offering my forthright contraposition.

Definition: For the purpose of this post, "social media" refers to the content visible to (nearly) everyone who also uses the same platform (eg profile, feed, comments). I do not refer to private messages sent between a very limited number of users (direct messages or small groups), nor do I refer to medium sized groups with moderation actively maintaining their good climate (such as this forum).

Why I consider social media to be Anti-Epicurean (in no particular order):

1. **Living for Virtue:** Throughout the Stoic-Christian dark ages of The West, social norms, such as gender roles, defined what one's life would be like. Playing one's part with [sincerity](#) meant doing well; personal desires or wishes were irrelevant. It took a very long time for *authenticity*, the development of personality based on personal values and preferences, to replace this. On social media, only virtuous profiles are successful, receive likes, followers, and little hate mail. This leads one to construct a profile around virtues and causes. Unlike theatre/movie actors playing a part, users identify with their profiles, thus want their real-life to keep up with the idealised online representation of themselves, such that they can feed their profile with proof of as much ideal, virtuous behaviour as possible: [profilicity](#) puts every thought under scrutiny, as the [heteronomous](#) "What would Jesus do"-attitude of sincerity is replaced by an equally heteronomous "How will social media react"-attitude of profilicity. This results in a life lived for causes and according to virtues sanctioned by the zeitgeist, which is [engineered](#) by people who do not have our best interests at heart (instead, they simply follow their own agenda).

2. **Arrested Personal Development:** With authenticity, any (un-)virtuous action was ephemeral, which allowed everyone to change their mind easily as facts change or new facts emerge; likewise, behaviour was ephemeral and limited to those it immediately affected, allowing personal development to take place without artificial restrictions. In contrast, social media archives all past statements and mishaps, which requires changes in opinion and behaviour to outshine, to overpower the cumulative weight of all past statements, creating much more inertia in how we are perceived. How we are perceived informs how others mirror ourselves back at us, which in turn influences how we see ourselves ("One becomes a self through encountering an other." – Martin Buber). How we see ourselves influences how we behave, closing the inertia loop. Many people know the extent of this effect when interacting with past friends or estranged relatives: The same social dynamic arises again, even though – on their own – many of those involved have long since changed. This is because what has not yet changed is their image, is how they're perceived, what is mirror back at them. This reactivates how they think of themselves, reactivates old roles, old behaviours, old feelings. Further inertia is created by the self-fulfilling prophecy of humans performing according to expectations, irrespective of whether those expectations are [high](#) or [low](#), and other strong innate group effects (see section Unnatural Desire below).
3. **Alliances not Friendships:** Social media divorces action from reaction, such that we do not receive honest and immediate feedback on how our statements impact others: Feedback is often delayed, which limits emotional bonding.[2] Even when feedback is nearly immediate, it is filtered for compliance with virtues, to toe the party line and withstand public scrutiny, and its impact is flattened (eg, we will never react the same to a tearful emoji as we do to a physically present, crying person). This hinders the development of friendship, which is considered a central aspect of Epicurean life, because friendship relies on attachment, which in turn relies on holding space and emotional co-regulation: Not platitudes of sympathy (eg "At least it will end") but presence of empathy (eg "I'm here, I hold you") are what we seek when in pain, not platitudes of congratulation (eg "You worked hard for it") but presence of compersion (eg "Wow, show me!") are what we seek when exhilarated. At its worst, social media lacks the moderation of shame and empathy when forming lynch mobs. At its best, it forms positive alliances, which fall short of deep friendship.
4. **Tempts to a Stoic Attitude:** The real pain of enduring [what self-righteous internet vigilantes can do](#) easily outweighs the empty pleasure of virtual likes, which is why to be a feeling being on social media often contradicts hedonic calculus: the vulnerability of being authentic, being vulnerable by accidentally being oneself or by making a mistake results in anything from shaming to [swatting](#), which [can have profound](#), and [even fatal](#) effects. To protect from that, one has to portray a persona of virtuousness, exercise perfectionism, and in the inevitable event of a mistake, either adopt an emotionally Stoic attitude or withdraw, because showing emotion will only serve to further spur on the bullies; after this tidal wave is over, either the pain of shunning and ghosting needs to be endured – or being Stoically dead inside is invoked once more...

5. **Anti-Science / Post-Truth:** Epicurean philosophy implicitly follows the scientific method, where objective reality is the final judge of truth. However, fact-related interactions on social media are not rooted-in or tested-against reality, which is why they are considered post-truth debates. Rhetoric, PR tricks, and power of status matter more than reality. Additionally, when people have built their profiles around causes, they are unlikely to change their views, because any facts to the contrary don't just threaten their opinion, they threaten the entire identity, threatened the very core of who they understand themselves as being. Instead, under conditions like this, the human psyche prefers false but self-validating information over the truth. Paired with the propaganda-like effect of algorithmic [filter bubbles](#), all this can easily lead even critical thinkers astray and even [radicalises](#) ideologues to extremists and fanatics. And finally, even if one has been able to withstand all of this, the narrow corridor of opinion required to keep people in their mindless trance glued to the screen – which is the billion-dollar business of filter bubbles – will inevitably, insidiously serve to constrict one's [Overton window](#), until so little openness to diverging views, let alone contradicting facts remains, that any sensible debate becomes impossible, effectively splintering society (making it vulnerable to divide-and-conquer-type political ploys), leaving detrimental [groupthink](#) and other [bad group dynamics](#) unchallenged, allowing them to solidify in people's minds. As habituation for diverging views/contradicting facts further diminishes, the severity of negative reactions to exposure to such views/facts increase: what should be nothing more than another point of view can suddenly cause outrage, even [violent hate crime](#). As is the case with all gradual, subconscious psychological effects, this cannot be countered effectively, and eventually afflict everybody; furthermore, because the person does not know how open to diverging opinions/contradicting facts they would otherwise be, this induced shift in personality remains concealed from their conscious awareness, making it nonconsensual and harmful. ("The time when you should most of all withdraw into yourself is when you are forced to be in a crowd." – Epicurus (Seneca's Letters, Book I, Letter XXV))
6. **Unnatural Desire for Status:** The allure to conform to groups is extremely hard to resist, [even when we have nothing to gain](#). This is even more the case, when [social pressure is applied](#) or when [group dynamics are at play](#), or [authority is invoked](#) – even [by total strangers on the phone](#). This is because of humans' innate instincts as a pack animal. All these effects happen involuntarily, which makes it factually impossible to be uninfluenced by the feedback of likes, followers, and (positive or negative) comments. As a result, even if we can resist the group effects for a while, it requires immense effort, which will insidiously change our behaviour according to what yields the highest gain in status.
7. **Unnatural Desire of Addiction:** Social media is intentionally designed to [capture as much attention as possible](#) (because the corporations behind them earn their money through ad sales; there is no free lunch, so if a service is free, *you* are the product). Social media is designed to subconsciously, involuntarily keep one stuck in innate emotional response-systems, whether those are [negative](#) or [positive](#) emotions. This leads to more time spent as intended, followed by rationalisation, habituation, compulsion, addiction.

We only have one life to live, and even though we're all different, I am confident neither "I wish I spent more time arguing with strangers online" nor "I wish I spent more time looking at cat videos" will be on any of our list of regrets.

8. **Unnatural Desire for Perfection:** The constant interaction with one's own and other's pretend-perfect social media profiles causes a strong [desire to turn them into a reality](#), which [can be debilitating](#). Besides damaged self-image and body-image, a tendency to consumer debt may result. Furthermore, constantly faking things for one's profile habituates people to lying, which is a slippery slope: Only those who see the truth, acknowledge it and face it can change. Others get stuck in [cognitive dissonance](#) and eventually develop unhealthy [defense mechanisms](#), such as [distortions](#). Thus, ignoring reality like this leads to Arrested Personal Development (see above) and risks mental health issues. ("All of humanity's problems stem from one's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." - Blaise Pascal)
9. **Shortened Attention Span:** Being able to focus on a task is mostly a trained skill (and typically not an innate capacity). Cultivating that skill allows for increasingly more difficult tasks to be doable within one's flow state, which is pleasurable. Thus, the investment into the ability to focus can easily pay off. On the other hand, social media use requires one to focus on many small, short and usually shallow items. This constant task switching is taxing for many, and lets the ability to focus, read longer texts and think with good depth atrophy, which can turn previously pleasurable tasks into chores, analogous to how many physical activities are possible and pleasurable to us only if we are fit enough.
10. **Incompatible with miscellaneous Epicurean behaviours:**
  1. Epicurus welcomed everybody; social media culture does not.
  2. The widespread use of [intermittent reinforcement](#) and [FOMO](#), even without exploitation of the survival-instinct's [negativity bias](#) (eg through [rage-baiting](#)), is an outright antithesis to ataraxia. ("Although security on a human level is achieved up to a point by a power to resist and by prosperity, the security afforded by inner peace and withdrawing from the crowd is the purest." - [PD14](#) (White))
  3. Additionally, Epicureans are inspired to think for themselves and to cultivate close friendships, not to hand over their agency or person to a commune. However, when one is continually exposed to campaigns, most of which are algorithmically perfected to bypass the scrutiny of rational thought, especially using [dark patterns](#), [bots](#) and [nudging](#), even the most stubborn mind will eventually succumb ("In order to be an immaculate member of a flock of sheep, one must above all, be a sheep." - Albert Einstein) and gradually believes can be [internalised](#) which one would otherwise have been rejected. In conjunction with all previously stated problems, social media thus amounts to smoldering, relentless [brainwashing](#).
  4. Every species is hardwired for survival, which implies being hardwired for attaining as accurate and full a picture of reality as possible. This is why the inevitable adoption of a distorted view of reality by social media users leaves them with a vague, gnawing sense that something just isn't right, just doesn't add up. Continually overwriting this warning signal by one's subconscious is painful. The same is true for internalised [egodystonic](#) thoughts. ("If you live according to nature,

you will never be poor; if you live according to opinion, you will never be rich." – Epicurus (Seneca's Letters, Book I, Letter XVI))

5. Epicurean philosophy was not taught by beating about the bush; social media as a tool for exchange or learning would inevitably be just that (examples of much better options: for exchange, use a forum like this; to learn, read a book) and procrastination is in contradiction to [Vatican Saying 14](#).
11. **Imprudent:** Epicurean schools were decentralised; social media is centralised. Epicurean schools were self-reliant; social media users depend on oligopolistic services of strangers. Epicurean philosophy could only spread and thrive because of free speech; outside of North America, social media is usually heavily censored. Throughout human history, the darkest detours were marked by a virtue-driven culture, by people over-identifying with a cause, which they forcibly went after by centralisation, censorship, policing their own peers, shunning, shaming, scapegoating, lack of empathy, dehumanisation, an ignorance of reality, as well as personality cults, creating the impression that everyone agrees, because nobody dares to speak their truth, and this false impression of universal consensus in turn served to justify all the evil actions being undertaken; all the ingredients to this soup of horror are readily available in social media. Playing with such fire is not prudent.

This lead me to conclude that I am better off without social media, and since I have quit (except for [a de-social-media-ised version of Youtube](#)), I feel quite unburdened and am much happier. Alternatives (in no particular order):

- Spend more time in reality.
- Shift activity to forums like this one, with a welcoming, supportive culture.
- Spend more time with private or small group conversations, such as email, chats/messengers, or better yet: phone calls.
- If social media cannot be avoided, using [distributed](#) (or at least [federated](#)) systems avoids the problems of centralisation. Some of these, especially distributed ones, also offer some protection of free speech on a technical level. Just a few ([SSB](#) & [PZP](#)) additionally follow a peer-to-peer invite-type model which mimics natural human interaction in fluent social circles and would not produce the negative effects inherent in currently widespread social media; unfortunately, they're uncommon, tricky to use, and receive no funding (probably because they can neither be monetised nor abused...).

Unfortunately, this approach might not work for everyone, particularly because quite some people still use Facebook groups (even though I feel like, thankfully, their heyday is over); a few might even use social media at work. If using social media for (something akin to) Facebook groups, I recommend searching the web for alternatives, particularly forums (like this one). If there is no suitable alternative, I'd suggest firmly establishing this habit: *First* create in your mind a small, measurable goal of what you want to achieve (eg "Ask the group about XYZ", "Read top 3 replies to XYZ"). *After* this goal is set, enter the platform, perform your task, and leave. (This is analogous to adhering to shopping lists to get a grip on impulse purchasing.)

For those who have trouble reliably staying in conscious control, such as staying on for longer than intended to perform tasks unrelated to the decided-upon goal, I suggest using Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP). That's the name of a method used to (re-)build and improve impulse control, which works nicely to regain awareness and control over Internet-based behaviours and many other behaviours which have left conscious control, which have taken on sort-of a life of their own. ERP has proven itself for many years (mostly around OCD), and there are now lots of good resources available for it. This makes it quite accessible, such that the majority of people can learn it on their own, without needing to consult professionals. (Which does not imply that practising ERP with someone who is experienced with it is without benefit.) I use ERP for certain behaviours myself (which I don't want to quit entirely, but better keep reigned in). From that experience, I can confirm the promise that after it was mastered for one problem, it readily lends itself to the next, and continually grows, making it increasingly more powerful, more effortless. "Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight." (Rollo May) It is precisely this freedom that ERP strengthens.

A more general conclusion is that history doesn't repeat, but it rhymes, and so once again a large portion of the population is motivated by social pressure to engage in a strange, harmful behaviour, which only serves to make other people happy - in the past, that might have been smoking or tight-lacing. Of course, none of these invaded one's mind quite as much, or carried within them the building blocks of dystopia. The good news is that social media did not eradicate other modes of interacting online - it had merely overshadowed them. Since then, much time has passed, which allowed forums and other modalities to become better, too. The few good features pioneered by social media were adopted, the remainder discarded, and as long as users continue to select the fittest, the evolution of the web will continue. However, users need to select, need to assume their responsibility and make conscious, wise choices. If where we spend our time is the new currency, let's purchase the quality each and every one of us deserves.

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#### Footnotes:

1. Please note the language: "*my view*", "*can be considered*". Just like articles titled "[X considered harmful](#)" do not attempt to praise but to criticise X, I will not even attempt to defend social media. Since there are no absolutes, there will always be a case in which social media is positive. My opinion is, however, that (a) if social media didn't exist, the majority of those positive outcomes would have happened in another way, and, most importantly, that (b) if everyone who is, after carefully considering the facts, harmed by social media would leave it, there would be no social media left - it would just be a handful of people on an odd, obscure site. I am painfully aware that this is not because social networking protocols for user-generated content must always be bad, but because of how social media, as we know it today, has implemented this idea. If I could, I would happily help those who work on redesigning it from scratch. Unfortunately, I do not have

the resources to do so. In my opinion, while the idea underlying social media is as valuable as mankind's understanding of nuclear physics, the actual implementation of it is as bad as atomic bombs - and are atomic bombs *absolutely* bad? Certainly not, seeing how a select few people made a lot of money with them, how a case can even be imagined where they save the world from a meteorite - but none of that justifies them as a casual part of daily life, does it?

2. This can be demonstrated if the [Strange Situation](#) is modified such that the caregiver is shown on a delayed video screen; once the delay exceeds a low threshold, the attachment breaks (and can only be repaired if the delay is reduced). Similarly, attunement, emotional co-regulation, holding empathic space require being present with each other - not being present after one another...