

# Beyond Stoicism (2025)

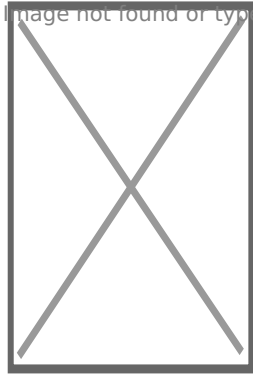
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*Beyond Stoicism: A Guide to the Good Life with Stoics, Sceptics, Epicureans, and Other Ancient Philosophers*

By Massimo Pigliucci, Gregory Lopez, Meredith Alexander Kunz · 2025

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[Beyond Stoicism](#)

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Same old, same old regurgitated nonsense regarding the Garden. "Beautiful obscurity"





## Chapter 2

### **AVOID PAIN AND STRESS WITH EPICURUS**

*Don't fear god,  
Don't worry about death;  
What is good is easy to get, and  
What is terrible is easy to endure.*

—Philodemus, from the Herculaneum Papyrus

It was a warm spring morning at the Garden, a property near the Dipylon gate, just outside Athens. The sun filtered through the branches of tall oak trees and dappled the fig, almond, and apple groves watered by streams from the Eridanus River. Bees buzzed around flowering shrubs. In the courtyard, the Garden's inhabitants were setting up their simple breakfast. Bread with olive oil, barley-meal, and pitchers of water graced the tables.<sup>1</sup>

Epicurus, the Garden's founder, took his place. A middle-aged man dressed in a simple cloak and leather sandals, he had a full, curly beard, a long nose, and a warm but serious gaze. "Another beautiful day living in beautiful obscurity," he said, prompting smiles and gentle laughter from those gathering for the meal. He scanned the benches, now filling up with his closest friends, people he had welcomed to join the Garden's experiment in group living.

"Good morning, friends," Epicurus continued, nodding to those sitting around him. "Remember this day as all days: Friendship reminds all of us to wake up to happiness! And now, let's eat. Our simple meal will relieve our hunger and thirst, and our conversation will lighten our souls."

Astonishingly, the friends who broke bread together under the cypresses were not exclusively high-born Athenians but included women and former slaves. Epicurus made a point to admit women to the Garden not as a rare exception but as a general principle. His was the first Greek philosophical school to do so. Even women who had been courtesans were welcomed by Epicurus, including his friend Leontion,<sup>2</sup> along with many other students and companions, such as Epicurus's favorite servant, Mvs ("Mouse").<sup>3</sup>



have now been lost), and received by them alongside his closest friends. That's what the Garden was all about.

At the Garden, no one talked about politics, business, or the gods. It was a place of serenity and escape in a time when the wars among Alexander's successors raged on for decades. The later Roman writer and politician Seneca tells us that Epicurus's Garden had this motto carved on the front gate: "Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure."<sup>8</sup>

This doesn't mean that the Garden-dwellers caroused in gluttonous feasts. Epicurus said a pot of cheese would be his biggest luxury, and he advocated for a down-to-earth yet pleasurable existence. Instead of rich, expensive foods, Epicurus and his friends enjoyed cheese and bread. Rather than racing around acquiring the latest fashions, they relied on basic tunics and cloaks. Instead of debating the most recent war, they spoke calmly about the nature of the cosmos. Rather than engaging in frequent sexual relationships and marriage, they cultivated close friendships and deep conversations. Their late-night philosophy seminars were legendary.<sup>2</sup>

At the Garden, Epicurus remained cheerful and kept sharing his ideas until the end, even when riven with pain from ailments, including kidney stones, that slowly destroyed his health. True to his ideas, he was unafraid of death and passed away calmly in his bathtub, surrounded by friends, in 270 BCE.<sup>10</sup>

For generations to follow in the Greek and Roman world, Epicurus was celebrated as the *heros ktistes* ("founding hero") of the Garden, with commemorations held in his honor during his birthday month.<sup>11</sup> Bronze statues were erected in his memory, and several of his followers named their children Epicurus. As the ancient biographer Diogenes Laërtius put it, Epicurus's friends were "so numerous they could not be measured by entire cities," and "all who knew him [were] captivated by the siren spells of his doctrines."<sup>12</sup>

## Sophisticated hedonism

Contrary to what you may have heard, Epicureanism is *not* the philosophy of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, though this misconception has been around for a while—ever since the time of Epicurus, in fact! There is even some doubt that Epicureanism qualifies as a hedonistic—that is, pleasure-seeking—philosophy. For Epicurus, the highest "pleasure" is lack of pain, something that would have hardly satisfied the Cyrenaics (see [chapter 1](#)), who most certainly *were* hedonists.

Rather, Epicureanism is about reaching two goals in life: *aponia* and *ataraxia*. The first means that you are in no physical distress at all. We reach *aponia* when we are not thirsty or hungry, nor lacking anything else that the human body requires. *Ataraxia* means tranquility of mind, which is achieved when we no longer have fears, unfulfilled desires, or any of the mental states that otherwise disturb us. You may be inclined to think that there is more to life than not being hungry or fearful, but Epicurus would beg to differ, and he put forth some pretty good reasons that are worth entertaining.

The basic Epicurean argument in favor of finding pleasure and avoiding pain is simple; that's what Nature very clearly tells us. Think about human infants and how they behave. At bottom, they are drawn to comfort and withdraw from unpleasantness. And who are we, say the Epicureans, to think we can do better than Nature itself?

Epicurean philosophy identifies three kinds of desires: natural and necessary, natural but not necessary, and unnatural and unnecessary. The first category is satisfied by things like the acquisition of clothing, shelter, food, and water. The desire we have for these things is natural, meaning that we seek them instinctively, without having to justify why or think too much about it. This desire is also necessary, because without clothes, shelter, food, and water we'd be dead or lead a very uncomfortable life. The good news is that such needs are also easy to satisfy, all things considered.

The second category—desires that are natural but not necessary—is in a sense an elaboration of the first group. Consider things such as designer clothes, gourmet meals, fancy wine, and a large house. Desiring

