

# Article By Dr. Emily Austin - "Epicurus And The Politics Of The Fear Of Death"

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2025 at 4:11 PM

## [Quote from TauPhi](#)

Correct me if I'm wrong Cassius but I think it's widely accepted position that Hellenistic Philosophy was largely practical. And this applies not only to Epicureanism but to all main philosophical schools of that period. The main focus was how to live the Good Life and not how to think about the Good Life.

We are talking impressions here and I am sure everyone's will vary. What I would point to are the arguments that are contained in Tusculan Disputations and like works to the effect that "virtue alone" is sufficient for happiness. Part 5 of TD is entirely devoted to the topic, including the criticism of Aristotle as to the argument that anything can really be "good" other than virtue. This is not some quirk of Cicero either - I would argue that it is inherent in Stoicism and its popular interpretation that everything other than virtue is at best a preferred indifferent.

Now, no doubt general perceptions of philosophy are a moving target. Your comment gives me the opportunity to focus on what I see as the part of the target that needs focus here in the mid-2020's:

Epicurus is widely held in "intellectual" circles to hold that the goal of life is "absence of pain." Some (well represented here in this forum) tend to focus on physical aspects of that. However the "intellectual consensus" outside the forum in the words of prominent writers like Warren and Okeefe and others is that Epicurus was promoting a form of "therapy of desire" (the Nussbaum book title). They hold substantially that Epicurus was promoting the lowering of desires to a minimal possible level, which fits quite well into their argument that "absence of pain" does not include what people normally think of as pleasure at all. Their position is not that Epicurus considers mental / appreciation of life pleasures to be part of the Epicurean goal *in addition to* stimulative physical pleasures, they argue that stimulative mental and physical pleasures are not really a part of the Epicurean goal at all, except to the extent that they might occasionally be required (by eating and drinking for example) to obtain their non-active state of "absence of pain." Not everyone is going to agree with me, but that is exactly what I believe they mean when they stress "absence of pain" as the distinguishing feature of Epicurus. And I believe they especially mean that when they repeatedly use the untranslated Greek "ataraxia" instead of explaining what they really think Epicurus meant.

I agree with you that Epicurus himself would not have held that *The main focus was how to live the Good Life and not how to think about the Good Life.*

However, you can't understand what the good life is unless you can explain it in clear terms that lead to correct thought. What I accuse the majority of commentators other than Austin and DeWitt of doing is buying in to the Stoic argument that virtue is either all that matters or the most important thing that matters. In doing so they are implicitly or in many cases explicitly separating thought from action.

I want to make it a part of our conversations on the forum here in 2026 to make this point more explicit as it is leading in my view to some unnecessary confusion.

I think it is a shame that Emily Austin had to write this article, and I think Epicurus himself would be taken aback that something as fundamental as the desire to remain alive so as to experience more pleasure needs to be defended at all. I believe that explains the reaction some have that the article is confusing or poorly focused.

However I am convinced that the article definitely needed to be written, and more like it need to be written. In fact I read Austin's book as an enlargement on the point of the article, which is:

That Epicurean philosophy has been taken over by Stoicisers and synthesizers who do not primarily agree with Epicurus as to the absence of divine designers, as to the absence of life after death, and as to the focus on individual pleasure and pain (widely understood) as the correct ethical guide. These Stoicisers and synthesizers have rendered Epicurus' original focus almost unrecognizable,

That's why it's my number one goal to seek out and emphasize every argument from every source that identifies the core fundamentals of Epicurus and applies them to real life, and strips away all this incompatible overlay that I do not believe was there in the ancient world.

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As a closing note I'll say that I consider the Nussbaum book to be Exhibit #1 as an illustration of most of what is deeply wrong in modern analysis of Epicurus. I don't recommend anyone read it for assistance in understanding Epicurus at least until they have made themselves aware of the major issues, which is something DeWitt is especially good at explaining. After that it's easy to see why "Therapy of Desire" is one of the favored works of "modern Epicureanism."