

During the time of Epicurus, who could read well enough to study philosophy?

Post by "Cassius" of July 9, 2026 at 1:27 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

However.... I think an absolute necessity to the teaching and learning process had to be frequent, (dare I say more than weekly) meetings for both the illiterate and illiterate to learn and adopt the lessons from the Garden(s) into daily life.

Had to be frequent, and I would say likely had to repeat and focus on key points rather than deliver (for example) a Lucretius-length monologue.

That reminds me that someone brought up to me in regard to recent discussions that there are significant content differences (not conflicts, but topics covered) between the letter to Menoecus and the [Principal Doctrines](#).

Based on what I have read i would predict that the [Principal Doctrines](#) were in wider circulation, and perhaps came later, than the letter to Menoecus. It's certainly helpful to have them both, but opens up avenues for significant textual analysis to compare what is in the PDs vs what is in the letter and think about the implications of those differences.

For just one example, [PD03](#) is either an explicit or implicit statement of the "only two feelings" doctrine, which is not stated explicitly in the letter to Menoecus.

That's quite shocking when you think about it - the PD's don't lead off with discussion of Happiness or Eudaimonia or tranquility or anything else as the ultimate goal, but with focusing on the limit of quantity of pleasure and how pleasure and pain are the two alternatives.

Addendum:

We can presume for the sake of argument that Chatgpt has been talking to me and has picked up my biases, but unless someone thinks the following is wrong, it is striking:

Q. - In the document known as the [principal doctrines](#) of Epicurus, do words referencing eudaimonia or happiness or tranquility appear, or are all references to pleasure?

A - The short answer is **no**. The [Principal Doctrines](#) do **not** present **εὐδαιμονία (eudaimonia)** as their organizing concept, nor do they repeatedly speak of "happiness" or "tranquility." Instead, they consistently make **pleasure (ἡδονή, hēdonē)** the standard of the good.

A few observations:

- **The noun εὐδαιμονία ("happiness," "flourishing") does not appear** in the [Principal Doctrines](#).
- **Ἡδονή (pleasure)** and related forms appear repeatedly and explicitly as the goal and criterion of life.
- **Ἀταραξία (ataraxia, tranquility/freedom from disturbance)** does **not** appear as a central term in the [Principal Doctrines](#). The doctrines instead speak descriptively of being "free from disturbance" or "without fear" rather than elevating *ataraxia* itself as the goal.
- **Ἀπονία (aponia, absence of bodily pain)** likewise is not emphasized as an independent goal; rather, the doctrines repeatedly define the limit of pleasure as the removal of pain.

For example:

- **PD 3:** "The limit of the magnitude of pleasures is the removal of all pain."
- **PD 5:** "It is impossible to live pleasantly (*hēdeōs*) without living prudently, honorably, and justly..."
- **PD 18:** "...the flesh does not need unlimited pleasure..."
- **PD 25:** "...if you do not refer each of your actions to nature's end, but instead turn elsewhere... your actions will not agree with your principles."
- **PD 26:** distinguishes natural desires by whether they produce pain if unfulfilled.
- **PD 29-30:** classify desires according to pleasure and pain.

Where later interpreters often speak of "tranquility," the [Principal Doctrines](#) themselves usually express the idea through phrases such as:

- freedom from fear,
- freedom from disturbance,
- confidence,
- security,
- living pleasantly.

This is an important point because many modern presentations summarize Epicurean ethics as aiming at **ataraxia**. That summary is more characteristic of later doxographical tradition than of Epicurus' own ethical formulations in the [Principal Doctrines](#). In these doctrines, the **explicit telos is pleasure**, while tranquility is presented as a consequence or characteristic of the pleasant life rather than as a separate or higher end.

Indeed, if one simply counts the vocabulary, the contrast is striking:

Concept	Presence in the Principal Doctrines
Pleasure (<i>hēdonē</i>)	Frequent and central
Pain (<i>algos, ponos</i> , etc.)	Frequent and central
Happiness (<i>eudaimonia</i>)	Absent
Tranquility (<i>ataraxia</i>)	Absent as a noun

Concept**Presence in the Principal Doctrines**Blessed (*makarios*)

Present, especially in PD 1 regarding the gods

This lexical pattern strongly supports the view that Epicurus himself framed his ethics in terms of **pleasure**, not **eudaimonia** or **ataraxia**, even though later authors—and many modern scholars—often use "happiness" or "tranquility" as convenient summaries of the results of living pleasurably.