

Draft Your Own Personal Outline of Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of January 16, 2018 at 7:57 PM

2024 Update

We have had many good discussions stemming from this suggestion to draw personal outlines, but here is one point of clarification: There are two goals of significance - (1) to improve your understanding of your own ideas, and (2) to improve your understanding of Epicurean philosophy. In other words, just as Thomas Jefferson did, you should be able to list out the ideas of Epicurus in a form that shows that you understand them. However that doesn't mean that your list constitutes your personal manifesto of life any more than Jefferson's meant that Jefferson himself always followed every statement in the list. Therefore as you consider adding your outline here, be sure to consider that the first goal out to be to be able to state accurately what Epicurus held before you yourself can decide whether you agree or disagree with him.

Outlines are important in learning Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus advised in the letter to Herodotus that everyone should be able to reduce the major principles of the philosophy to a simplified outline of the main points. Epicurus wrote:

"Those who have made some advance in the survey of the entire system ought to fix in their minds under the principal headings an elementary outline of the whole treatment of the subject. For a comprehensive view is often required, the details but seldom. To the former, then—the main heads—we must continually return, and must memorize them so far as to get a valid conception of the facts, as well as the means of discovering all the details exactly when once the general outlines are rightly understood and remembered. It is the privilege of the mature student to make a ready use of his conceptions by referring every one of them to elementary facts and simple terms. For it is impossible to gather up the results of continuous diligent study of the entirety of things unless we can embrace in short formulas and hold in mind all that might have been accurately expressed even to the minutest detail."

We know that Thomas Jefferson followed this advice because we have the outline he himself included in his [letter to William Short in 1819](#). Here it is in Jefferson's own handwriting ([link to full text of letter](#)) -

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Outlines, however, must be applied to particular circumstances in order to be useful. We have an interesting example of this in Jefferson's letter to William Short. Jefferson provided to Short his summary of Epicurean philosophy in general principles, but Jefferson also pointed a particular error that Short was committing: Even though Short considered himself to be an Epicurean, Short was misinterpreting the philosophy by thinking that Epicurus advised rest and repose as the goal of living. Jefferson corrected this error - an error still widely committed and spread by commentators today - by advising **action** to pursue pleasure, rather than **repose**:

"I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided." Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road. Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up."

Notice how Jefferson in the same letter described "in-dolence" as "the greatest felicity," while at the same time rebuking Short for pursuing indolence! This is an example of how Epicurean terminology cannot be considered superficially, and must be considered closely if it is to be applied correctly.

We each therefore need to learn to understand Epicurus thoroughly so that we do not misapply his advice. As an aid in following this path, this special forum group has been set up at EpicureanFriends.com, where you are invited to post your own personal outline as you study Epicurus. As you post, you can then receive comments and suggestions from others that will give you ideas and advice about how you can improve your personal outline.

The first step in applying Epicurean philosophy is to understand Epicurean philosophy, so you should first start with an outline of your understanding of Epicurus' views.

Next you can consider your own personal application. Although Epicurean philosophy has general principles that apply to everyone, Epicurus also emphasized the reality of the individual context in which we must apply the general principles. A good way to proceed in applying Epicurean principles is to outline your own application. Each person has their own context of concerns and spheres of action in which to consider how to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. The details of each individual outline will therefore vary according to those circumstances. Your detailed personal outline will eventually be too private to post, but general outlines can be included here for public discussion.

Here is an example of the variety you can expect:

Some people are already sufficiently confirmed in their own understanding of the nature of the universe that it is appropriate for them to stop (at least at first) with a broad conclusion, such as:

"Nature: The universe operates on Natural principles, and is not influenced by supernatural forces."

Others, however, will want to outline the study of the universe (physics) in much more detail so that they can understand, and hold with confidence, the reasons why this conclusion (the universe operates on natural / non-supernatural principles) is true.

Most, in all likelihood, are somewhere in between, and they need to outline the fundamentals of how nothing exists except matter and void, that nothing is ever created from or destroyed to nothing, and similar observations that underlay the fundamental conclusion that the universe is natural.

Here are a few suggestions for posting your first outline:

1. Keep it simple. Don't try to cover every aspect of Epicurean philosophy in the first outline. Make sure to cover the main points first.
2. Although you want to keep the outline simple, you also want to cover the three major branches of Epicurean philosophy: (1) The nature of the universe, (2) The nature of knowledge, and (3) The nature of how to live.
3. Don't delete your first outline post, but copy it over into new posts and make the changes there. That way you can follow the progression of your thoughts as you refine your understanding.

The best thing to do is go ahead and post your outline even if you think it is incomplete. A major benefit of this exercise is thinking through the process, and others can make suggestions for additions or changes as you go through the drafting process. You will no doubt find yourself redrafting over and over as you apply the general rules to your particular situation.

Remember: copying someone else's outline and adopting it as yours does nothing to advance your understanding of Epicurean philosophy or how it should be applied in your life. You may think that someone else has already developed the ultimate Epicurean outline, and think that it is sufficient to adopt it for yourself. A full understanding requires that you can state the principles yourself and explain why each of them is true and important.

Here's a good example of the pitfall of copying without understanding:

One of the most well-known outlines of Epicurean philosophy is the "Tetrapharmakon": (1) Don't fear God, (2) Don't fear death, (3) What's good is easy to get, and (4) What's bad is easy to avoid.

