

Parsing The Wikipedia Introduction To Epicurus (As Of February 6, 2020)

Post by “Cassius” of February 6, 2020 at 9:48 AM

Below is the Wikipedia introduction to Epicurus as of 02/06/20. I will highlight in red, and add a footnote to each statement which I contend is in serious need of correction or amplification.

Quote

Epicurus ([Ancient Greek](#): [Ἐπίκουρος](#), [romanized](#): *Epíkouros*;^[a] 341–270 BC) was an [ancient Greek philosopher](#) and sage^[1] who founded [Epicureanism](#), a highly influential school of philosophy. He was born on the Greek island of [Samos](#) to [Athenian](#) parents. Influenced by [Democritus](#), [Aristippus](#), [Pyrrho](#),^[3] and possibly the [Cynics](#), he turned against the [Platonism](#) of his day and established his own school, known as "the Garden", in Athens. Epicurus and his followers were known for eating simple meals and discussing a wide range of philosophical subjects.^[2] He openly allowed women to join the school as a matter of policy. ^[3] Epicurus is said to have originally written over 300 works on various subjects, but the vast majority of these writings have been lost. Only three letters written by him—the *Letters to Menoeceus*, *Pythocles*, and *Herodotus*—and two collections of quotes—the *Principle Doctrines* and the *Vatican Sayings* ^[4]—have survived intact, along with a few fragments of his other writings. Most knowledge ^[5] of his teachings comes from later authors, particularly the biographer [Diogenes Laërtius](#), the Epicurean Roman poet [Lucretius](#) and the Epicurean philosopher [Philodemus](#), and with hostile but largely accurate accounts by the [Pyrrhonist](#) philosopher [Sextus Empiricus](#), and the statesman and [Academic Skeptic](#) [Cicero](#).

For Epicurus, the purpose of philosophy was to help people attain a happy, tranquil life characterized by [ataraxia](#) (peace and freedom from fear) and [aponia](#) (the absence of pain) ^[6]. He advocated that people were best able to pursue philosophy by living a self-sufficient life surrounded by friends.^[7] He taught that the root of all human neurosis is death denial and the tendency for human beings to assume that death will be horrific and painful, which he claimed causes unnecessary anxiety, selfish self-protective behaviors, and hypocrisy. ^[8] According to Epicurus, death is the end of both the body and the soul and therefore should not be feared. Epicurus taught that although the gods ^[9] exist, they have no involvement in human affairs. He taught that people should behave ethically not because the gods punish or reward people for their actions, but because amoral behavior will burden them with guilt and prevent them from attaining *ataraxia*. ^[10]

Like Aristotle, Epicurus was an [empiricist](#), meaning he believed that the senses are the only reliable source of knowledge about the world. [11] He derived much of his physics and cosmology from the earlier philosopher Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BC). Like Democritus, Epicurus taught that the universe is infinite and eternal and that all matter is made up of extremely tiny, invisible particles known as [atoms](#). All occurrences in the natural world are ultimately the result of atoms moving and interacting in empty space. Epicurus deviated from Democritus in his teaching of [atomic "swerve"](#), which holds that atoms may deviate from their expected course, thus permitting humans to possess [free will](#) in an otherwise [deterministic](#) universe.

[1] Calling Epicurus a "sage" adds nothing useful, but injects confusion, suggesting that this term denotes some status that is important the reader should know about, which is not correct. Epicurus was a philosopher and founder of a school that was called after his name, nothing more or less. The description of "sage" at the wikipedia link just adds to the confusion by saying that a sage "is someone who has attained wisdom." The goal of life that Epicurus identified was pleasure, not wisdom; wisdom is a tool for achieving pleasure, not a goal in itself. [Torquatus in [On Ends](#): *So also Wisdom, which must be considered as the art of living, if it effected no result would not be desired; but as it is, it is desired, because it is the artificer that procures and produces pleasure.*]

[2] Eating simple meals and discussing a wide variety of philosophical subject is what they were known for? Ridiculous! Epicurus was known for rejecting both supernatural religion and Platonic rationalism / idealism, and replacing them with an understanding of the universe as eternal, boundless, uncreated, and based entirely on natural principals, an ethics based on the Natural faculty of feeling of pleasure and pain, and an epistemology grounded on reliance on the senses rather than logical abstractions. As for eating simple meals, [VS63](#). *Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess.*

[3] This statement is pandering to political correctness rather than beginning with information about Epicurus that is truly important. Epicurus also philosophized with slaves, but at the same time Epicurus held slaves of his own and did not free them in his will. Epicurus rejected the contention that there are any "absolute" standards of justice that apply to all people at all times and all places. Issues of political and social reform are not the starting point for understanding Epicurus, but downstream results that follow naturally from the basic fundamentals of his philosophy. [[PD33](#). *Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another, in any place whatever, and at any time, it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed.* [PD34](#). *Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which attaches to the apprehension of being unable to escape those appointed to punish such actions.* [PD36](#). *In its general aspect, justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another; but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country, or any other circumstances, the same thing does not turn out to be just for all.*]

[4] The authenticity of the [Principal Doctrines](#) as a genuine collection of quotes assembled by either Epicurus himself, or the early Epicureans, is well attested by the survival of the biography of Epicurus by Diogenes Laertius. The source of the "Vatican Sayings" collection is not known, but appears to be a far later collection of quotations assembled by an unknown collector, for an unknown purpose, using unknown standards of collection. It is true that they appear to be authentic, but their collection in this list probably deserves no more deference than any collection of Epicurean quotes made by anyone else in the past or present. As the [Epicurus Wiki notes](#): *The **Vatican Sayings** are a collection of maxims attributed (not always correctly) to Epicurus. The collection, dubbed "The Sayings of Epicurus" - or alternatively, "The Voice of Epicurus," was rediscovered in 1888 within a fourteenth-century Vatican manuscript which also contained [Marcus Aurelius](#)' Meditations, [Epictetus](#)' Manual, and similar works. We have no information regarding when or by whom the Vatican collection was made. Several of the Sayings are identical with some of the [Principal Doctrines](#). Some defy certain translation, and others are certainly not by [Epicurus](#) (refer to the analysis section for each individual maxim).*

[5] It is true that the writings referenced here provide important details, but the core letters of Epicurus and the information recorded by Diogenes Laertius contain a wide range of core information from which virtually all essential elements of the philosophy can be reconstructed. Other than details about the Epicurean view of "gods," the material preserved by Diogenes Laertius provides a reliable standard by which the writings of later commentators can be judged. In addition, the poem of Lucretius appears to be almost totally a "rewrite" in poem form of Epicurus' "On Nature," so when combined with Diogenes Laertius, and the material preserved in the inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda, we have a reliable core of material that can be relied on for understanding the fundamentals of Epicurean philosophy.

[6] "For Epicurus, the purpose of philosophy was to help people attain a happy, tranquil life characterized by *ataraxia* (peace and freedom from fear) and *aponia* (the absence of pain)." Written in this manner this sentence is significantly misleading. Epicurus was very clear that the goal of life is pleasure, which goes hand in hand with avoidance of pain, because these two feelings (pleasure and pain) are the only things in life which are intrinsically desirable (and undesirable) in and of themselves. Epicurean doctrine is based on the fundamental premise that there are only two feelings - (1) pleasure and (2) pain - which means that the experience of one of these feelings means that you are not experiencing the other. From this perspective, the measure of the amount of pleasure you are experiencing at any one time can be referred to as "absence of pain" just as the amount of pain you are experiencing at any one time can be referred to as "absence of pleasure." While it is fair to say that Epicurus advocated a "happy" life, the word "happiness" is so controversial, standing alone, that it is necessary to specify that a life of happiness is a life of pleasure. [Note: Diogenes of Oinoanda: *But since, as I say, the issue is not 'what is the means of happiness?' but 'what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?', I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state*

that this is true, making it our starting-point.] "Tranquillity," which is the meaning of "ataraxia" (literally, absence of disturbance) is an attribute of a life of pleasure, meaning that the pleasures of life are experienced without disturbance. As to the meaning of disturbance, "disturbance" is undesirable because it is painful, which means that "tranquility" is simply another way of saying "without pain" which is also the literal meaning of "aponia." This sentence as written therefore implies that the goal of life is something other than pleasure, which is not at all the case. The Epicurean goal can be understood very simply, and accurately, as a life of pleasure, with pleasure being widely understood as any type or combinations of feeling, both "mental" and "bodily" - any and all kinds of feeling - which are felt to be pleasurable rather than painful.

[7] "He advocated that people were best able to pursue philosophy by living a self-sufficient life surrounded by friends." This sentence is misleading because the goal of life for Epicurus was never "to pursue philosophy." The goal of life for Epicurus is to pursue pleasure, toward which philosophy is one of many tools that are helpful for the achievement of pleasurable living. Like "philosophy," "self-sufficiency" and "friends" are also characterized by Epicurus as important tools for living pleurably. However Epicurus did not advocate the pursuit of any tool, even philosophy or friendship, as an end in itself, and he emphasized that because the goal of life is pleasure, each decision must be tested by the question posed in [VS71](#): *Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?*

[8] It is true that Epicurus emphasized the importance of a proper understanding that we cease to exist at death, and that therefore there is no pain or pleasure, reward or punishment, in death. It is a significant overstatement to state that Epicurus held fear of death to be "the root of all human neurosis." Fear of death was not addressed in the first of the Epicurean ethical doctrines. The *first* Epicurean ethical doctrine was addressed to a proper understanding of "gods," and *all* Epicurean ethical doctrines were themselves preceded by Epicurean doctrines as to a proper understanding of nature (physics) and how to think (epistemology). Of the **forty** Epicurean Principle Doctrines, **one** (doctrine two) is addressed to the issue of fear of death.

[9] It is misleading in an initial summary to say that "the gods" exist without immediately explaining that [Epicurean gods](#) are not eternal, not omniscient, not omnipotent, did not create the universe, and are totally **not** supernatural. The attributes just stated are at least as significant, if not more significant, than the observation that [Epicurean gods](#) take no interest in and do not interfere in human affairs. An Epicurean is confident of the "non-intervention" position only because the Epicurean first understands the true nature of "the gods." Epicurus to Menoecus: *"First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the*

many. For the statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods. For men being accustomed always to their own virtues welcome those like themselves, but regard all that is not of their nature as alien."

[10] This sentence is misleading because it is unclear on what is meant to "live ethically." Epicurus taught that the goal of life is to live pleasurably, and that whatever means are required to live pleasurably are appropriate, even if we consider them to be despicable or depraved. This means that the choice to take actions which are perceived by others to be painful to them must consider all consequences of our actions. If we inflict pain on others, we can expect to be the target of efforts to inflict pain on us in retribution, either by actions taken by those on whom we inflict pain, or by those in society who are entrusted with enforcing any laws that are violated. Ultimately, however, the test is one of whether the action practically leads to pleasurable living, not whether it violates some alleged absolute standard of ethical conduct: [PD10](#). *If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.*

[11] This statement is seriously misleading. It is true that Epicurus held that the senses are of primary importance in the determination of those things which we hold to be true, but it is very overbroad to say that Epicurus held that "the senses are the only reliable source of knowledge about the world." The entire structure of Epicurean atomist physics is built on the foundation of "atoms" which cannot be seen, touched, tasted, heard, or smelled. The existence of atoms, and thereby the full sweep of Epicurean philosophy, is built on **deductive reasoning applied to the evidence that we obtain through the senses**. This issue is explained in full in Norman DeWitt's Chapter Eight. ["The criteria are three, but the prevailing custom is to reduce them to one by merging the Anticipations and Feelings with the Sensations. This error arises from classifying Epicurus as an empiricist, ascribing to him belief in the infallibility of sensation, and then employing this false assumption as a major premise."]

