

How To Convert A Neo-Epicurean Into A Classical Epicurean

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Throughout history, there's a trend – though, not absolute – for **neo**-Ideologies to actually be syntheses between ancient systems and contemporary counterparts. We often observe **neo**-Ideologies when an apologist attempts to demonstrate coherence between an older, heterodox tradition, and a dominant, modern orthodoxy, despite their apparent contradictions.

With this in mind, the question becomes, "*Can Epicurean philosophy incorporate innovations – which can be demonstrated to be 'coherent' with Epicurus' teaching – and still be considered 'classically Epicurean'?*"

Let's look at the practice of Vipassanā meditation. A number of studies seem to demonstrate that this specific form of meditation will reliably reduce emotional disturbance, and remove psychological barriers that keep people from improving their circumstances. The practice, itself, seems to be coherent with Epicurean materialism. On top of that, even when we look at the Eastern philosophy behind the practice, we see more nuance: the Abhidharma text from the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism makes a defense of atomism: "An atom (paramānu) is the smallest rūpa (form). It cannot be cut, broken, penetrated; it cannot be taken up, abandoned, ridden on, stepped on, struck or dragged. It is neither long nor short, square nor round, regular nor irregular, convex nor concave. It has no smaller parts; it cannot be decomposed, cannot be seen, heard, smelled, touched. It is thus that the paramānu is said to be the finest of all rūpas". While the practice of meditation is deeply rooted in Buddhism, the physical practice, itself, has psychiatric utility by using natural tools. So there is coherence between large parts of the philosophies. This suggests that an adoption of some "Buddhist" practices can still be Epicurean, in the same way that the reverence of *The Buddha* has been adopted as an acceptable practice for orthodox Hindus to adopt (as long as *The Buddha* is seen as an inferior avatar to the *Supreme Brahman*).

Now, that was an example of a religious tradition that provides some level of coherence with Epicurean philosophy; let's consider an example, of a non-ideological, scientific discipline that conceptually agrees with Epicurean philosophy, but arrives at incompatible conclusions. While Epicurus appropriately grounded celestial phenomena in physics (as does contemporary meteorology and astronomy), he made a number of errors in his conclusions. Even though he acknowledged the limitations of the 4th-century, a number of his guesses were notably inaccurate. If we held contemporary scientific disciplines to the same rigor as we would ideologies, should we not consider Epicureans who accept contemporary meteorology and astronomy to be, **necessarily** "neo-Epicureans"? I think we'd agree that that is unreasonable, since everyone since, at least, the Enlightenment would not qualify as a "Classical Epicurean".

That being said, the category of "neo-Epicurean" is still relevant, and important. So, I think that would be defined as any philosophy whose original tenets are in overwhelming contradiction with the doctrines of Epicurus. Thus, one of the two philosophies would have to be altered to gain coherence with the other. An example may be a Thomist Christian who claims to be "Epicurean", and revere Epicurus due to his exploration of the material world, while being rather mistaken in the larger picture of Epicurean philosophy (and failing to recognize his Peripatetic influence). This (hypothetical) attempted synthesis between Christianity and Epicurean philosophy would be an example of "neo-Epicureanism". Similar (to reference a recent project), a synthesis between "Dudeism" and Epicurean philosophy would, with these parameters in mind, qualify as "neo-Epicureanism". Dudeism is compatible with Agnosticism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism, each of which conflict with Epicurean teachings ... *at the same time* , Dudeism also conflicts with some of its inspirations in its promotion of a hedonist ethics. So, we have ethical and ontological coherence, but the epistemology and aesthetics differ. These are pretty irreconcilable differences, so I'd say this would be "neo-Epicureanism", and, while I'm thinking about it, I think this is the fundamental, distinguishing variable: "Are the differences fundamentally irreconcilable"?

A minor example, which I see as being coherent with Epicurus' doctrines, thus, being "Classically Epicurean", would be Thomas Jefferson. If we hold him to the same rigor, he should be considered a "neo-Epicurean", since he clearly invokes the mythology of the "Creator" in numerous documents (which is at utter odds with the Epicurean notion of an eternal universe). But if Thomas Jefferson cannot be considered a "Classical Epicurean", then who, after the 2nd or 3rd-centuries CE can? If we can accept Jefferson as an authentic Epicurean, even though his deism hints at a finite universe, then couldn't we just as easily accept movements like Secular Humanism as well as mock religions like Satanism and Pastafarianism? For that matter, there's a lot of coherence between the ethics and physics of atheists and agnostics despite their being theological differences. Specifically, the issue of theology seems to be minor to most of us - I think a tremendous amount of this group identify as "atheists", even though this is a direct contradiction with Epicurean orthodoxy.

So the question is: "Where do we draw the line"? Can *atheists* be "Epicurean"? Or are *atheists*, necessarily "neo-Epicurean"? What about atomists and hedonists who practice Hatha Yoga, or Vipassanā meditation? Are they "Epicurean" or "neo-Epicurean"? How about most of us since Newton who correctly understand that people can simultaneously live on both sides of the planet due to our modern understanding of gravity? Are we all "neo-Epicurean" because we have synthesized Newtonian physics with Epicurus' incomplete physics of "the downward force"? I'm positive that Epicurus would accept most of the conclusions contemporary physics, and would adopt its methods and findings. Perhaps the data from the Hubble telescope that suggests universal expansion would force him to re-consider the "eternal" quality of particles (which seem to not have existed while the early universe was too hot). Given that, a good question is this: should anyone who accepts "the Big Bang" and the Principle Doctrines be considered a "neo-Epicurean"

due to their acceptance of a finite cosmos that once lacked particles?

I'm not sure. I think that will be subjective between individuals. I think that foreign practices can be coherent with Epicurean philosophy, regardless of the ideological demands of their foreign, source material. We can adopt the practice of Hatha Yoga without adopting Pantajali's metaphysical dualism. We can adopt Vipassanā meditation without accepting the emptiness of Buddhist ethics. In the scientific realm, I think we can accept the observations of the Hubble telescope that challenge the *eternal cosmos* without in any way being considered to be "neo-Epicurean". I think that "neo-Epicureans" would have to be individuals who claim to identify with another tradition, yet see Epicurus as a major influence. In this sense, we might see *Dudeism* as a form of "neo-Epicureanism", or, for that matter, even some Mormons who admire Epicurus (if there are any), due to their multi-world, material cosmology.

But there will always be disagreements. The Church of the East, the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and Evangelical movements all claims to be the most authentic manifestation of Christianity. Sunni and Shi'a Muslims claim the same thing - and positively **love** fighting about it. Surely, some Epicureans will identify as atheists, whereas some might be agnostic; I argue that as long as they are hedonists who accept an epistemology of the senses, an ethics of pleasure, and a physics of atoms, they are fundamentally Epicurean, even if they have minor disagreements in the conclusions of Epicurus; as long as the methodology and doctrines are coherent, its still "Classical Epicureanism"; whereas Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Toaists (etc.) who admire Epicurus, and attempt to incorporate his easy-going nature and his suspicion of being manipulated, but reject atomism or hedonism, are "neo-Epicureans".