

# Fixed or Unfixed

**Post by "Charles" of January 4, 2020 at 3:38 PM**

Interesting question Oscar, but I think it has less to do with whether something is "fixed or unfixed" as it is instead the variety of the sources that we gather from. As you have probably surmised from the thread discussing the SoFE's 20 tenants, there is of course the classical interpretation, or in other words what Epicurus had envisioned, to understand his words in the context of Ancient Athens (ie why the problem of evil makes little sense when attributed to Epicurus). Indeed Epicurus himself told his students that they should write their own outlines and understandings of the philosophy. It's written in the Letter to Herodotus:

*"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. ... 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."*

However, given the history of the philosophy, it most definitely grew within the following centuries after his death, we see this with Lucretius and the elaboration of the idea of the Atomic Swerve (Clinamen), or throughout the middle ages up to the Enlightenment when EP was beginning to have the proper recognition it so rightfully needed when Lucretius and Epicurus were invoked alongside the materialists and hedonists and became incorporated into sophisticated worldviews. Simultaneously, even, the works of the Epicureans began having a clarity or revival so that they could be studied and accepted on their own merit without the help of Enlightenment thinkers using bits and pieces.

Epicurus himself was wise and proficient in philosophy, that we do not deny, but having a fixed view of him isn't too unlike an "ideal" Epicurus where we conveniently forget his statement about the sun or his meteorological predictions in his Letter to Pythocles.

Epicurean Philosophy stands as one of the few surviving ancient schools of thought, and almost alone in actually being right and correct without revisionism.

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 4, 2020 at 4:09 PM**

Oscar:

You are right to see a major distinction in our approaches, but I think there may be more to it rather than taking a position on how much Epicurean philosophy might have changed over the centuries in the ancient world.

For example, when Charles says this:

[Quote from Charles](#)

However, given the history of the philosophy, it most definitely grew within the following centuries after his death, we see this with Lucretius and the elaboration of the idea of the Atomic Swerve (Clinamen),

(Caution: in this post I am talking exclusively about your question of Hiram's approach vs mine. I cite Charles only because he happened to make this comment here and it's a good example of the type question that sometimes arises. I have seen some people take the position that Lucretius was deviating from Epicurus in many major fundamental ways and that's not what Charles is asserting, but some scholars apparently do.)

I take the position that there is no good reason to think that Lucretius deviated from Epicurus at all, and that the swerve and all other detail in the poem are mostly and probably totally just detail from Epicurus' "On Nature" that we lost from not having Epicurus' own work. And given Lucretius's own statements about his "reverence" and fidelity to Epicurus, there's every reason to think that he did everything he could to remain closely on track.

Now I am not so sure that the same could be said about Philodemus, but again his texts are much more fragmentary and "reconstructed" than Lucretius, so I always give him the benefit of the doubt as well, and look first to translation / reconstruction issues before I conclude that Philodemus intentionally deviated.

In addition, I think that there is good evidence in Diogenes Laertius and Cicero that later Epicureans compromised with stoics and other attackers on at least (1) the nature of the origin of friendship and (2) whether the canon has three legs or four, which is related to the Epicurean position on logic and reason.

I believe Dewitt covers both of these, and I consider both deviations from Epicurus to have been major undermining of the philosophy and contributing to its downfall.

Now the point I want to be clear on is that no doubt there were SCIENTIFIC discoveries of "facts" that would lead to modification of the probabilities Epicurus selected, such as the size of the sun, but I see absolutely no reason to think that any new scientific discoveries to this very day undermine Epicurus' \*approach\* to science, and how to deal with questions that arise when we have less than desirable amounts of evidence.

The divergence that you see between Hiram and myself is I think largely the result of Hiram using sources which are fragmentary, not well vetted, and largely speculative, to modify positions that are well established in the core texts and by the physics. For example that CAN BE NO absolute justice, and anytime Hiram (or Catherine Wilson, or me, or anyone else) implies that all Epicurean would reach the same moral or ethical or justice positions, then we are deviating from the core of the philosophy. I am sure that I fail to be sufficiently on guard and that I occasionally slip. but I perceive that others (let's use Robert Hanrott's blog, for example) simply make no effort to keep to the core position that a certain set of political views are their own, and cannot be asserted as universal using Epicurean philosophy as justification.

So getting back to your original question as to seeing Epicurean philosophy as a "conversation among friends" --- as to the core philosophy I absolutely do not see it that way at all. Certainly there WILL be conversation among friends as to APPLICATION of the philosophy, but the core itself is relatively simple, relatively clear, and being a set of premises about the way nature works is no going to be expected to be the subject of revision. This aspect may well explain any issues that arise from Philodemus -- he may have been extemporizing on his own, or doing his best to extend Epicurean principles to new fields, but I would bet my life that in doing so he made the same point I am making here - that application varies by circumstance, and does not constitute a change in the core philosophy.

Give me evidence of a life after death or a supernatural god and I will be the first to convert to that religion -- but the foundation of the philosophy, which is not open to change, is that there is absolutely no reason to expect that to happen, and so there is no reason to "keep an open mind" toward assertions of that kind, and every reason to guard against compromise and thereby undermining the confidence that we want to have in order to live as happily as possible.

So in sum I see the difference between my approach and Hiram's as both substantive on the issue of staying true to the core (which is that there is no absolute ethics) and procedural (on the question of how to deal with unclear and fragmentary texts, which is the subject addressed in Elayne's recent post.

I am writing this fairly quickly so I may have to revise and extend if I have forgotten something obvious -- and it's really in THAT regard that I see the proper application of "conversation among friends." That's the way I see my discussions with Hiram, with whom I have worked cordially for a long time. We all make mistakes and have different viewpoints, can remain friends as long as we proceed in good faith, but that doesn't mean that after time and reflection and examination of the question that "any position we prefer" is an acceptable basis for goal of a particular group. That's where it makes sense to particularize the goal is writing so that everyone is clear and can decide whether they are in or out on any particular project.

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**Post by "Cassius" of January 4, 2020 at 4:31 PM**

Something else that is probably clear because it come up regularly that bears repeating here.

I personally think that everyone should work to apply Epicurean principles to every aspect of their life, and that includes career, places to live, even politics.

And I think there is a time and place for that, for example my frequent example of citing Robert Hanrott. He has his application and he is stating it clearly.

My strategic concern is that in this forum, and in the projects that I am trying to invest most of my time in, I don't want to scare away anyone of any political persuasion by having them read something and think that Epicurean philosophy is left, right, center, or non-aligned. There's a time and a place for all of those, and I how those will develop and flower separately.

But I am really impressed with what DeWitt accomplished in making headway in recreating and explaining the core philosophy without getting into day to day divisive issues, and I think there's a lot more work to be done with that kind of approach. That's where I want to see Epicureanfriends.com and my other work go. Others will go in other directions regionally and by interest group, and at some point I may join in with some of that. But hot-button social issues create too much opportunity for misunderstanding.

It's kind of like Lucretius warning his readers not to dismiss the theory too quickly before understanding it. There will be plenty of time to disagree on applications after we understand the core points, but if we don't understand the core points first we'll never have a basis for getting off the ground in the first place.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of January 4, 2020 at 4:46 PM**

You got me going Oscar I have another example:

I also think that something that keeps rearing its head is that we are going to have to follow DeWitt's lead and pursue our understanding of Epicurus as a supreme anti-Platonist.

What I am referring to here is that although it seems clear that Epicurus himself detested logic games and the dialectical method, it seems clear that he decided that he needed to confront the Platonic arguments by developing responses that beat Plato at his own game -- using logic to show the shortcomings of logic. So even though he detested it, Epicurus engaged in logical warfare himself, and for better or worse much of what we have in the surviving texts in Epicurus' own hand was that part of his writing - where he was laying down the logical premises which Epicureans could study and learn and apply to defeat the logicians at their own game.

I think that is primarily what is involved in probably the most contentious issue facing us all - coming to an understanding of the "absence of pain" discussion in the letter to Menoeceus.

As you know I have come to the conclusion that this discussion is primarily aimed at the logical arguments against pleasure that were advanced in places like Plato's [Philebus](#). Unfortunately the letter to Menoeceus is so short and gives so little background that this connection is not at all clear from the surviving text, and since we today are not immersed in logical arguments about "limits" and "purity" and "highest good" -- the normal person is going to interpret these passages without that context -- and without that context, taking the passages on their own in their current English translation forms -- then they can be read to be totally contradictory to much of the rest of the philosophy, for reasons we have discussed at length elsewhere.

So my point here is that what likely happened in the centuries after Epicurus is that the Epicureans were constantly confronted with logic game attacks by stoics and platonists, and it appears that some of them lost their nerve and attempted to compromise. Even today we face a powerful tendency to consider "logic" and "reason" to be unimpeachable references, from being taught to revere Mr. Spock and in 1000 other examples.

And the flip side is that we are taught to deprecate "feeling" / "emotion" as something to be suppressed and/or ignored and/or always to be distrusted.

So my point in this post is that even though I think we are clear that Epicurus' ultimate point is that "feeling" is the guide of life, we're still going to have to recognize that much that we have in the surviving texts constitutes "logic games" that were made necessary by the hostile environment in which the Epicureans (and we) live.

And that's huge part of the reconstruction battle that DeWitt trailblazed for us, but in which there still tremendous work to be done.

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## **Post by “Elayne” of January 5, 2020 at 8:59 AM**

This is definitely worth discussing.

Not to beat a dead horse, but I consider my own philosophy to be "the philosophy of reality"-- some aspects of reality are not changed by conversations among friends, such as the speed of light, but others are, such as the feelings of those in the conversation. Sometimes the conversation may include discussion of research evidence that affects parts of the philosophy.

I consider Epicurus' writing to be the gold standard for what he meant, and I agree with him to

the extent he was correct about reality, according to how his words have held up after centuries of ongoing scientific research and my own briefer subjective experience. I've personally found him to be amazingly on point in a startling array of conclusions, but not infallible. If none of his words were incorrect, I would wonder if I'd been brainwashed, because I don't think that's humanly possible. His basic structure is sturdy. When he talks about the stomach not being insatiable, that's certainly how it is for me-- if he said hunger couldn't be satisfied, I would say for sure, he was wrong about me!

For everyone after him who goes by the identifier Epicurean, if their words conflict with reality \_and \_ Epicurus, I would say they don't have grounds for self-identifying that way, although I cannot stop them. If they conflict with Epicurus but are reality based, my guess is that he would have accepted compelling new evidence and wouldn't have a problem. If they stick with Epicurus but ignore modern physics, they are more in the religious category than me, for sure, and I think but can't prove that he would not be impressed.

Basically, the test of any philosophy should be its compatibility with evidence. And since reality was the core of his philosophy, it's hard for me to think of anything non reality based as Epicurean. Conversations among friends can lead to nonsense if not grounded in evidence.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of January 5, 2020 at 4:13 PM**

I don't have time today to watch it, but I will later. I don't have any interest in science on its own account either! I'm interested in it because of pleasure-- the pleasure of learning, the way the study of nature can help me predict outcomes of decisions more effectively, and some of the pleasurable technologies that have come about through research. However, some technologies have also created pain or fear, so I'd be very specific about them.

I do know that Epicurus recommended studying nature. The scientific method had not been developed yet, but he did make multiple observations of human nature, in a systematic framework -- our motives for action-- which I would consider important.

I don't consider any part of science important unless it adds to my pleasure. I have not personally added much to the total of knowledge about nature, and if someone used that as a criticism against me, I don't really care, since that's not a standard I'm trying to meet. How would you decide how much added knowledge counts as a significant advance, or even what's an advance and what isn't, if pleasure isn't the goal?

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## Post by “Elayne” of January 5, 2020 at 4:34 PM

oh, is this just Bertrand Russell being read out loud by someone? I couldn't figure out why what you said sounded familiar but you're quoting Russell. He has gotten a lot of Epicurus wrong... all that stuff about living solely on bread and water when the man had a garden in Greece and held feasts every month. The misunderstanding of Epicurus on pain and pleasure... Russell didn't appear to have understood Epicurus to me. He was covering a huge amount of philosophy territory but superficially. We've talked about Russell before, I think. But maybe not in one place. He might need his own section.

Here is the text if anyone wants to read instead of listen. For me, reading is many times faster.

<http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Hi...0Philosophy.pdf>

On the science, I'm not aware of Epicurus accepting an answer which had been proven incorrect (different from saying all the possible explanations were material and that this was all that mattered) but if he did, I would have to disagree with that strategy, because an error in describing reality could lead to errors in planning pleasure.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 5, 2020 at 4:53 PM

Yes I am going to watch this later but I agree with Elayne, and the part you quoted Oscar seems very unfair to me. I suspect that this is overblown, even to some extent this from DeWitt:

### [Quote from Oscar](#)

“His handbooks of doctrine were carried about like breviaries; his sayings were esteemed as if oracles and committed to memory as if Articles of Faith. His published letters were cherished as if epistles of an apostle. Pledges were taken to live obedient to his precepts. On the twentieth day of every month his followers assembled to perform solemn rites in honour of his memory, a sort of sacrament” - Dr. N.W. DeWitt concerning the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in the Graeco-Roman world

To be charitable I would think that this might apply to SOME people, or might apply to YOUNG people who were being trained at younger ages, but I do not think that it is likely accurate to broad-brush the entire school as overly cultish.

I think it is very possible to respect and admire someone and give them the benefit of the doubt when you aren't sure of something yourself, without giving up your own mind and feelings and your own senses and your own evidence, especially when the core of what that person is teaching you is that you MUST use your own mind and feelings and senses to weigh the evidence, since that is how he came up with the philosophy in the first place.

Just to be clear I am not saying that you Oscar have a false view, I am saying that I see in a lot of commentators, especially the more Stoic-minded ones, the tendency to see Epicureans in an unflattering way, which in my mind is likely caused by the fact that they disagree so strongly with Epicurean viewpoints on religion, ethics, etc.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 5, 2020 at 7:17 PM**

#### [Quote from Oscar](#)

I think that's the least Epicurus requested from us in his dying words, no?

Yes probably so..... I just try to avoid the word "cult" because it has so many connotations of giving up one's independence of thought, which i think is inherently the opposite of what the philosophy teaches. I know that DeWitt used the word -- I suppose the connotations were bad in his day too, but I bet they are worse today. My take is that you can be like Lucretius and revere someone as a father figure or even godlike without giving up your own freedom or crossing the line into thinking that Epicurus could never have been wrong on anything.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 6:21 AM**

Excellent point about "cult classics" --- that is a sense of the word that I do think applies. I also think of an analogy to "sports teams" in the modern world. People get very attached to their sports teams/clubs but most of the time they don't lose touch with reality in doing so.

## **Post by "Cassius" of January 6, 2020 at 7:36 AM**

Getting back to the earlier issue of incorporating new evidence / facts:

Absolutely and Epicurean is always going to look for, observe, and incorporate new facts into his application of the philosophy and how to live.

BUT what is the number one fact that must be considered?

The first and most important fact is that you are a finite being, and you are never going to have access to all of the evidence / facts that you would like to have.

So if that is the case, what do you do?

You start off with a framework of analysis that acknowledges that you are finite, while the universe is infinite, and you perfect your "operating system" - your "philosophy" - that allows you to function confidently within the sphere of facts that are open to you.

That's what Epicurus did, nothing in the intervening centuries has been discovered to change that framework, and that's why his work is valuable today in its original form, rather than being "improved" by all sorts of changes which ultimately fade into significance in the face of the practical need to live and take action in an unlimited universe in which the evidence open to us is limited. Epicurus shows us how to defeat the numbing and paralyzing and slavery-inducing effects of standard religious teaching and Academic philosophy.

And that's what I also think is so dangerous about accepting the implication that such and such a scientific theory has it all figured out, or that the "universe" is all expanding from a center, or that Yahweh is the one true god, or whatever. If you keep focus on the logical big picture that the universe is infinite in time and eternal in space, then it's easy to see that all these shortsighted theories are ultimately traps, and it's easy to dismiss them as impossible. That is a huge confidence-builder in the face of nihilism, and it's totally justified by the evidence that is available to us -- nothing in our experience (or in reliable human history) has ever come from, or gone, to nothing. All the rest is deduced from that factually-irrefutable starting point.

EDIT: I want to expand on this point in the future so I am setting up this thread in Physics: [Proposition: It is not the "science" of Epicurus that should impress us, but rather the "perspective" on science, or, if you will, the "limit" on science.](#)

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## **Post by "Hiram" of January 6, 2020 at 11:41 AM**

[Quote from Oscar](#)

### **Epicureanism: Fixed Once For All**

... "...another great fault (of Epicurus) was that of dictatorial dogmatism. His followers had to learn a kind of creed embodying his doctrine, which they were not allowed to question; to the end none of them added or modified anything...when Lucretius later turned Epicurus' Philosophy into poetry, he added, so far as can be judged, nothing theoretical to the masters teaching (it appears [Cassius](#) is right about Lucretius remaining true to Epicurus)." [Hiram](#)

### **General disinterest for science**

[Elayne](#) ..."Epicurus has no interest in science on its own account, he values it solely as providing naturalistic explanations of phenomena which superstition attributes to agency of the gods. When there are several possible naturalistic explanations, he holds that there is no point in trying to decide between them... it is no wonder that the Epicureans contributed practically nothing to natural knowledge."

### **Charge of Hypocrisy**

If Epicurus said "The honour paid to a wise man is a great good for those who honour him" but didn't himself repay those to whom he was intellectually indebted; like his teacher who he called "the mollusk", Democritus, etc... That sounds like dishing out advice he doesn't follow himself.

Does anyone know why he hated so strongly the thinkers who actually influenced him? Is this true or are the sources which describe such behaviour by Epicurus not to be trusted?

Edit: my thoughts on the above is that I will respect Epicurus' wishes that his philosophy be unadulterated. I will not seek to infuse my philosophy into Epicureanism as to sell it deceptively as Epicureanism when it really is just my own philosophy. I think we should be cognizant when others may be doing this, and point it out when we see it taking place. I will thus be only contributing to Epicureanism if it is respectful of Epicurus. I think Hiram has a signature sign-off that Epicurus final words were "never forget my teachings" so we should do that and respect the dying Sage's final request. All that now said, I will still focus primarily on the development of my own philosophy, contributing to philosophy by adding and/or modifying wherever necessary and pleasurable.

edit: the quote by Hiram is "always remember my doctrines" ... which makes sense.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVOvgAy1IC0>

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Yes, most of us believe that Lucretius was true to Epicurus. (The author of "[Ontology of motion](#)" disagrees, if you're interested in reading a counter-point).

Concerning the point that Epicurus had no interest in science for the sake of science, yes he was a philosopher and the role that philosophy plays for science and religion and other human projects is to provide ethical guidance. In his case, he pointed the finger at pleasure. **This is the role of philosophy.** On the one hand, those who are scientism enthusiasts put too much faith in human artifacts instead of nature; on the other hand religious people and anti-science activists want to advance policy that leaves us all at the mercy of unempirical doctrines that impede human progress (think: stem cell and other forms of useful research). So it is important to understand the role of science as producing empirical data, and the role of philosophy as providing moral guidance for how to use this data. This does not mean that someone like Carl Sagan or Richard Dawkins who is in awe of nature and its processes should not or would not find EP useful--on the absolute contrary. Both science and philosophy are necessary, and both have their roles.

Concerning the accusation that Epicurus was hypocritical, that is one possibility, but another one is that (I don't remember the source now, but I remember reading somewhere, maybe in Laertius?, that) "the Mollusk" had a problem with drinking too much wine, which sometimes has the tendency to make people obnoxious. We can't know today what Nausiphanes was like when sober, or when not-sober. But I have a feeling that there was more than a difference of opinions in their proverbial parting argument.

Also, consider that Epicurus arrived very late in the philosophy game, and received many of the arguments that had been previously presented as well as counter-arguments. This allowed him to put his intellect to work with the best benefits possible. He benefited from this, creating a synthesis of impressive maturity of all the most important insights of ancient Greek thought: the atomism of Democritus, the Cyrenaic pleasure ethics. Even his ideal of "ataraxia" was informed by an encounter with Pyrrho, who left a very deep impression on young Epicurus--so that he replaced Democritus' ethical ideal of cheerfulness with "ataraxia". Now, obviously, he did not take in the Skeptic doctrine of Pyrrho, only his demeanor. And he went on synthesizing the best of what he found throughout his life into a philosophy that made progressively more sense.

[Oscar](#) I hope you write a blog detailing your own personal philosophy. (I think everyone should do this, and update it periodically because your views will evolve).

My book TtEG was published in 2014, and a couple of years later I wrote [Six things I learned since writing it](#). Tomorrow is the official publication date of "[How to live a good life](#)", for which I wrote the "Epicureanism chapter" (originally I had wanted to title it "Choices and avoidances" but the editors required that each chapter be titled after the tradition it represents). It contains a 5,000-word essay, which I wrote as if it was my narration of the most updated version of MY

outline of Epicurean philosophy. This was extremely useful and allowed me to organize my thoughts. My review of the other chapters in the book will go live tomorrow.

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### Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2020 at 12:58 PM

#### [Quote from Hiram](#)

Concerning the accusation that Epicurus was hypocritical, that is one possibility,

Not a possibility that I myself would ever admit! 😊

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### Post by “Hiram” of January 6, 2020 at 3:01 PM

#### [Quote from Oscar](#)

I can agree with a lot of the above. I found your book TtEG delightful and appreciate the encouraging message therein for readers to develop their own *wisdom tradition*. As for an outline of my personal philosophy, I'm using every Twentieth of 2020 to focus on developing and sketching it out. After December 20th, 2020, it will be interesting to know and revealing to see just how much -- from a philosophical perspective -- I've grown and changed over the time of just *one* year.

Congrats on the new book, I look forward to reading it 😊

If you don't have a blog, I hope you create one!