

How To Convert A Neo-Epicurean Into A Classical Epicurean

Post by "Cassius" of January 15, 2020 at 8:33 AM

This is a stub to be rewritten into a long article. For the time being:

1. I am convinced that if a young person and/or someone who knows very little about Epicurus first reads [DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy"](#), then followed by [Lucretius](#), [Diogenes Laertius](#), [Diogenes of Oinoanda](#), and the Epicurean sections of Cicero ([Torquatus](#), [Velleius](#)), without reading any Wikipedia articles, books written after 1960, or Youtube videos, they would never become a "NeoEpicurean" in the first place. They would be grounded in Epicurean fundamentals and would never be tempted toward [the Stoic / Eclectic / Neo-Epicurean approach](#).

For those however who have already been "corrupted" by the modern non-DeWitt academic consensus, and that includes probably 95% of the people who find their way to Epicurus because they are looking for "tranquility," there needs to be a path of study and rediscovery of what [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) was all about. That path would probably be something like this:

1. Read the Boris [Nikolsky](#) article "[Epicurus on Pleasure](#)" to see that there is a credible academic opinion which deviates from the "orthodoxy," and which holds that the katastematic/kinetic distinction is not Epicurean but a Stoic overlay.
2. Read the [chapters devoted to Epicurus in the Gosling and Taylor book "The Greeks On Pleasure"](#) to find a credible and thoroughly documented treatise which will explain in detail how Epicurus was focused on ordinary pleasure and not some ineffable "absence of pain" (which is essentially what is entailed in most "katastematic" arguments). (Note: the link is to only part of one chapter; the book is hard to find except in a library but well worth finding, because it traces the full history of philosophical debate about pleasure from the beginning of Greek philosophy up through Epicurus and slightly beyond. This is an excellent way of extending DeWitt's observation that Epicurus is essentially the ultimate anti-Platonism.)
3. Read the Wenham article "[On Cicero's Interpretation of Katastematic Pleasure](#)" for emphasis on how all goals of any significance to Epicurus must have been based on sensory experience (because absence of sensory experience is death).
4. These first three well-researched, well-documented, and academically-respectable sources ought to be sufficient to convince any fair-minded person, *even in academia*, that the academic consensus may be monolithic but ultimately is fatally flawed. With this new open-mindedness, it is then time to proceed back to DeWitt, who the academic reader

- would likely never have found previously, since he is effectively blacklisted in academia.
5. Now start at the beginning with [DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy"](#) and observe primarily how Epicurus was in rebellion against Platonism and Skepticism, and how these aspects - the erection of a logical argument derived from physics and canonics (epistemology) to identify and defend pleasure as the goal of life - are the true heart of the philosophy and the necessary prerequisite for understanding the ethics.
 6. Then read Frances Wright's "[A Few Days In Athens](#)" and [Thomas Jefferson's letters referencing Epicurus and Plato](#) to see that some great past minds saw things much the same way (no obsession on "absence of pain" as the key to Epicurus).
 7. Then go back into [Lucretius](#) and study the details of the analysis to see that as the Epicureans presented the philosophy to themselves, the key is physics, canonics, and pleasure as ordinarily understood, with no hint that "absence of pain" or "katastematic pleasure" is front and center in the philosophy, but rather how the methodology (a deductive process tied tightly to the observations made through the senses/feelings/anticipations) is the key to the entire structure.
 8. From there I would include the warning to always be on the lookout and on guard against anyone who is shrinking back, or inventing reasons for, avoiding the word "pleasure." Unless the writer is embracing "pleasure" and defending it boldly, you can bet that the writer does not really either understand or endorse the Epicurean system, and that he or she is leading you down the path of NeoEpicureanism.
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Post by "Charles" of January 15, 2020 at 12:06 PM

Not to derail the thread, but I hope I can eventually thread Epicurean Philosophy to the Enlightenment era thinkers, and hold them in almost the same regard as Cicero/Philodemus. Providing a clear path throughout history is extremely important and gives us the platform on which to oppose those who oppose and censor us.

Mettrie seems promising in this regard, a la "I ask you Anti-Epicureans" quote and numerous references to Lucretius and shared sentiments about Death and Pleasure (he may echo Metrodorus and he certainly did not believe that pleasure was the absence of pain).

Edit: by clear path I mean having a library of books that we can potentially cite, since the Stoics and Platonists have their volumes, we only have a few letters, epistles, and fragments, barring Lucretius.

Post by "Cassius" of January 15, 2020 at 1:46 PM

You haven't derailed the thread yet as you are the first post 😊 Your goal seems excellent to me and that would surely be helpful if it is doable. I do much the same in citing Thomas Jefferson and Frances Wright, who specifically cited and endorsed Epicurus.

As I just added in point 8 in my list above, it seems to me that it is a telltale sign as to whether the writer specifically embraces the word "pleasure" and also specifically mentions Epicurus himself as uniquely the leader on this issue. Absent either one of these attributes I would be reluctant to call the writer "Epicurean," as clearly the Epicureans of the ancient world did both.

Post by “melkor” of May 1, 2020 at 12:43 PM

If you don't mind me asking, what is the ultimate difference between a classical Epicurean and a Neo-Epicurean? I almost sometimes feared that I might have made some Neo-Epicurean remarks but then again I am not entirely sure. I know that I try to stay as close to what Epicurus said as much as possible but I can't accept every single thing since we've made advancements in modern physics and cosmology that put his original cosmological models into question (for example, whether the universe is infinitely old or whether something equivalent to "The Swerve" happened).

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 1:58 PM

Melkor the "ultimate" differences are probably much more in the "ethics" side of things than in the physics, so long as the physics interpretations remain vigorously non-supernatural.

It might be easiest to address your concerns if you have specific areas in mind (just as you mentioned the physics) but I think it is fair to say that we've tried to capture the most important issues in this article here:

[Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean](#)

In Elayne's article here there is more detail on the pleasure aspect: [On Pain, Pleasure, and Happiness \(07/15/19\)](#)

And I think you'll find that the issues that most frequently come to the surface in the ethics are represented by the view on pleasure, which is a matter discussed here: [The Full Cup / Fullness](#)

of Pleasure Model

It's always interesting and educational for me to discuss this issue, because it does seem like it really isn't as mysterious or difficult to get a handle on as it might appear.

Lately, we've had some discussions that focus me in the direction of seeing that the issue of "happiness" is near to the center. Because the question is "What is happiness?" and what is the relationship of happiness to "virtue" and to "pleasure." Why did Diogenes of Oinoanda feel the need to SHOUT this formulation:

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into "what is the means of happiness?" and they wanted to say "the virtues" (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. 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.

I do not believe that this passage refers only to the issue of "virtue" but also to ambiguities in the use of the term "happiness" itself. The word "happiness" can mean just about anything to anyone, and is too high-level a concept to be used without explanation, which I think is what Diogenes in Oinoanda was exercised about.

If there is one reliable guide that has stood the test of time in my experience as the most reliable indicator of whether someone is really in tune with the ancient view of Epicurus, or whether that person is in danger of sliding down the slope into the abyss of "NeoEpicureanism" it is the issue of "pleasure." How frequently does the person refer to pleasure, how central a role does the person see "pleasure" to play in Epicurus, and how willing is the person to accept Epicurus' view that pleasure needs no definition, and means exactly what we think it means, and that it does NOT mean (in full) "absence of pain."

It's my experience and view that Issues of physics and other questions of "fact" about the workings of nature are ultimately resolvable in good faith so long as there is no opening of the door to supernaturalism. I recognize that there are differences of opinion on some epistemology issues (as to anticipations, and as to "dogmatism," which really revolves around our definitions of "truth" and "certainty" and things like "confidence.") But I think all of those are ultimately resolvable as we study the texts and keep in mind the limitations of "dialectical logic" and "reason abstracted away from the senses." I think most of us who get into Epicurus in the first place at least sense where Epicurus was going in his attacks on Plato and abstract logic, so those issues are resolvable in virtually every case.

But the issue of "pleasure" can be significantly deeper. No doubt there are people who just want to avoid the issue, and use a generic word like "happiness" so as to appeal to wider numbers of people, and I understand and accept their motivation in at least certain circumstances. But there is a limit to what can be achieved to such approach, and the next level of understanding to me hinges on the issue that it is FEELING that is indeed at the center of human life. The issue is not really "types of pleasure" or even "how to achieve pleasures efficiently and safely." The issue really is that Feeling / Pleasure holds the place in Epicurean philosophy that supernatural gods hold in the field of religion, and that "logic" holds in the field of expert academia. The Epicurean Canon is not just a means of achieving the goals that are set by religion and logic, the Epicurean Canon is a FULL REPLACEMENT and FULL COMPETITOR to religion, and to "expert logic." I believe that many people who start out with Epicurus sense that this conflict exists and it is at the root of the controversies, but they are either unwilling to proceed to grapple with it, or else they abandon the field and decide that their flag is either religion or "logic" or some Aristotelian combination of the two.

I'll close for now by repeating that this is very important material to discuss and I hope you'll continue the thread with anything that seems worth discussing.

Post by "Charles" of May 1, 2020 at 2:00 PM

[melkor](#) While there is no solid definition of Neo-Epicureanism, we can say with confidence that its someone who takes a specific interpretation on Epicurus, one that deviates away from Epicurus & Lucretius most notably in ethics and by extension, politics.

The most common Neo-Epicurean takes I hear are some of the following: pleasure is the absence of pain, Epicurus advocated for calm, rational pleasures over bodily pleasures, that Epicurus was celibate or lived frugally like an ascetic, that friendship is the *greatest* pleasure, or advocating a specific contemporary political stance claiming Epicurus would've done the same (Catherine Wilson for example does this with abortion).

A lot of Neo-Epicureanism stems from a deviation of hedonism following the 19th century with thinkers like J. S. Mills or Bentham, the idea of there being "higher and lower pleasures" or adopting pleasure into some societal model like Utilitarianism. Of course there is also Marx & Engels who wrote about Lucretius and the former's doctoral thesis was on Democritean & Epicurean Atomism. But these writers and thinkers differed from the 18th century hedonists by prioritizing things other than pleasure, they refused to be apologists for the garden or of pleasure itself.

Opening up to these revisions and scapegoats has allowed this new (Neo) and modern

interpretation of Epicurean Ethics (Epicureanism), with one particular paragraph within the Letter to Menoceus dominate public perception and most academic attention onto the subject, thus creating Neo-Epicureanism, or at least that's my interpretation as to how this vast difference came to be.

I'm forgetting to mention influences like Buddhism and the trend of minimalism as well, but I think my point was established in the origins of it, rather than contemporary influences.

Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean

1. Not "flourishing," "human potential," "self-actualization," or "meaningfulness," but happiness grounded in the feeling of pleasure.
2. Not "absence of pain" as a full statement of the goal of life, but "the Feelings are two, pleasure and pain" and "Pleasure is the beginning and the end of a happy life."
3. Not virtue for the sake of virtue, but virtue as instrumental for the attainment of pleasure.
4. Not "the greatest good for the greatest number," but "Every desire must be confronted with this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished and what if it is not?"
5. Not "humanism," "transhumanism," "individualism," "collectivism," "egoism," "altruism," "social progress," "Marxism," "democracy," "tyranny," or any "one size fits all" political ideal of any kind, but social structure based on friendship which "is formed and maintained by means of a community of life among those who have reached the fullness of pleasure."
6. Not "hard determinism," but "some things happen from necessity, some from chance, and others through our own choice."
7. Not "supernaturalism," but "materialism."
8. Not "supernatural gods," or "life after death," but confidence in a fully material universe and "for those men for whom wisdom is possible, and who do seek it, such men may truly live as gods."
9. Not only "short term hedonism," but "it is to continuous pleasures that I invite you."
10. Not "rationalism," but "all reason is dependent upon sensations."
11. Not fearful of death nor careless of losing life, but valuing life for the opportunity of pleasure it brings.

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2020 at 2:04 PM

Excellent summary Charles!

Post by “melkor” of May 1, 2020 at 2:38 PM

Thanks for the clarification. I think then the only issue with me is that I would consider myself a follower of certain political ideologies that are grounded in my wanting for more humans to achieve pleasure. What is the classical Epicurean stance on political positions? Is it simply left to the individual, and we are not to discuss or change society? I do not believe in the "higher and lower" pleasures idea, but I do welcome legislation that seems to favor more pleasure and reject those that advocate pain of sort to humans or animals.

Post by “Charles” of May 1, 2020 at 3:09 PM

The general consensus about Epicurean Philosophy and politics at least from what I've observed is that politics is considered a hands-off topic within a Garden, and that an Epicurean should only engage in politics if they are forced by some external factor like a brutal regime or an administrations policies directly interfering with their pleasure in life. To that we don't mean that an Epicurean should always avoid politics, I always took the "avoid all culture" quote in tandem with Epicurus' perspectives of marriage and politics, in that we should avoid trapping ourselves with current cultural influences, that we do not need to feel arbitrarily compelled to follow these customs and norms.

Take the last of the Principle Doctrines for example, they all deal with conceptions of Justice. Meanwhile in Diogenes Laertius, its noted that Epicurus wrote a book about Governmental Power (On Kingly Power).

I'm sure many of us here on this site have very different political opinions about the world that we more or less keep to ourselves. Yet we all get along as we share a common interest: pleasure.

What is considered "unacceptable" would be to extrapolate the ideas of Epicurus and translate them into explicit approvals of contemporary political ideals, such as claiming that Epicurus might be a communist because of the structure of Gardens, or that Epicurus would be a libertarian because Epicurean Justice is similar to the Non-Aggression Principle.

However the topic of what an "Epicurean State" might look like has long fascinated me and no extant works actually humor the idea, and for good reason, yet it remains a focal point of critique against us. I'm referring to Epictetus' Discourses, Book 3 Chapter 7.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 3:12 PM

Here's my answer: By no means did the classical Epicureans take the position that we should "never" be involved in politics. Look at the example of Cassius Longinus, and there are others as well.

The caution I always make is that people are individuals and have different programming for pleasure and pain, and by no means do everyone take pleasure and pain in the same things.

Given that difference, I do not think it is possible to take a *Philosophic* position that one view of pleasure or pain is *philosophically* approved by nature for everyone. That is also in my view the clear meaning of the last ten of so, [principal doctrines](#) as to justice, which are all about pointing out that there is no "absolute" justice.

I think Epicurean philosophy is hugely helpful in deciding how to evaluate politics and how to take political positions, but I also think that just like in the Roman Civil War it is possible for Epicureans to be on opposite sides of many important issues, so we should be careful not to overstep our bounds and say that Epicurus would endorse only one set of political positions. The clear (to me) import of the doctrines on Justice tells us to expect that people are going to take different positions about how they want to live, so applications of Epicurean philosophy to politics needs to take that into account.

So in my view too the prohibition here on discussing politics is no so much because there are not Epicurean implications, but because here, and at this stage of trying to organize people to discuss and promote the basics of Epicurean philosophy, we really don't want to be drawn into day-to-day disputes that would demoralize and divide and weaken us before we even get started.

No doubt in the future such divisions will occur, as you can already see them on other websites and commentators, some of which are overtly "leftist" and some of which are not (and quite the opposite in fact). But for now, and for here, we want to focus as a group on learning the basics before we go off as individuals pursuing our individual views of pleasure and pain, much as we would, if we were at a convention, divide up into groups to go to restaurants of various types.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 3:16 PM

I agree with Charles, and I think he is pointing to the probability in the future, as I did, that individual Epicurean "Gardens" (local groups) would probably consist of people whose interests are aligned due to their background or location or whatever, and given that consensus it would be natural for them to find no issue with promoting particular ideas or actions that would be "off limits" to a worldwide internet group such as this one.

I can easily see that a Polish Epicurean garden or Russian Epicurean Garden or a Brazilian Epicurean Garden would have very different interests and priorities, but I also do think that in order for them to justify the name Epicurean they would start with teaching the same basics about the nature of the universe, epistemology, and ethics. Then after that surely every Epicurean would be able to recognize how much they have in common as a small minority against the rest of the world, and they could individually decide when and how and where to cooperate among themselves.

But the first foundational issue is understanding the basics of the philosophy, and being able to systematize and explain it, and there is a huge amount of work for us to do on that while leaving day to day political issues to others.

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2020 at 3:25 PM

[Quote from melkor](#)

I do not believe in the "higher and lower" pleasures idea, but I do welcome legislation that seems to favor more pleasure and reject those that advocate pain of sort to humans or animals.

Melkor another illustration that I like to use to focus on the difference between the Epicurean perspective and the Stoic/Platonic or even Aristotelian perspective is this quote from Cicero, which I think represents the OPPOSITE of the Epicurean viewpoint. This is from the Loeb Edition of Cicero's Republic, and the point I am focusing on is the paragraph that begins with "True law is right reason...."

Personally I used to think this was one of the greatest things I had ever read, but now in retrospect I see it as an ultimate expression of the anti-Epicurean point of view, because there is no "God" who is the master / ruler / author / and promulgator of such law, and so this kind of "true law" simply cannot exist in an Epicurean atomistic universe:

Laelius . . . But he¹ certainly ought not to have our young men as his audience. For if he really believes what he says, he is a villain; but if not, as I prefer to think, what he says is at any rate pernicious.

...

XXII. . . . True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions. And it does not lay its commands or prohibitions upon good men in vain, though neither have any effect on the wicked. It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely. We cannot be freed from its obligations by senate or people, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it. And there will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times, and there will be one master and ruler, that is, God, over us all, for he is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever is disobedient is fleeing from himself and denying his human nature, and by reason of this very fact he will suffer the worst penalties, even if he escapes what is commonly considered punishment. . . .

Compare that to the last ten [Principal Doctrines](#), and what you know about Epicurean physics and the impossibility of there being a supernatural god, or a central point in the universe from which you can stand and say that only one perspective is correct, and the difference is just jarring.

Post by “melkor” of May 1, 2020 at 3:39 PM

Thanks for the reference material. I understand more so that the largest issue is trying to use Epicurus as a justification for modern political opinions, but we are allowed to be political in our own way but not usually discuss it or be very open about it. I am personally very staunchly political and have been for a number of years and have only grown more strongly so in recent events and appreciate discussing politics with people but for the sake of this forum I will avoid

it as to not bring down this site. So I will not bring specific politics here.

My highest ideal in life is still pleasure, and I want to pursue pleasure in life and believe it is the end of life. My political views reflect that, but I don't necessarily need to use Epicureanism for advocating it, I suppose. However, an Epicurean could still be a libertarian or a liberal or a conservative or a Marxist or anything else of that nature?

Post by “Godfrey” of May 1, 2020 at 3:51 PM

That's a great quote Cassius! Can't get much more anti-Epicurean, and that certainly describes the thinking that I was raised with.

It's pretty horrific to contemplate as an Epicurean. A lot of blood has been shed over that idea. The mere fact of that bloodshed serves to invalidate the idea if one bathes it in the Canon.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 3:53 PM

[Quote from melkor](#)

However, an Epicurean could still be a libertarian or a liberal or a conservative or a Marxist or anything else of that nature?

I think that an Epicurean would find it very hard to take any position that was ultimately religious-based, but the ones you have listed are more perspectives on how to organize an economy, and I would say that it *would* be possible to an Epicurean to think that the interest of himself and his friends might under some circumstances be best served by adopting any of those systems depending on circumstances, and changing those systems as circumstances changed. My quote that comes to mind on that point is Jefferson's to the effect that "the earth belongs to the living."

[Quote from melkor](#)

My highest ideal in life is still pleasure, and I want to pursue pleasure in life and believe it is the end of life. My political views reflect that, but I don't necessarily need to use Epicureanism for advocating it, I suppose

I want to repeat something that I think can be confusing but ought to be very clear. I think political goals CAN be and often ARE the things that generate some of the most intense pleasure and pain in life, and so in that sense I do think that Epicurean philosophy is a direct part of pursuing political goals. I think that is exactly the way Cassius Longinus saw it. I do not think Epicurus would agree with the extreme to which it is frequently stated that Epicurus advised against *all* political involvement. I think that is clearly wrong and misunderstanding of the texts. "Political involvement" is regularly and probably frequently a requirement of maintaining our peace and safety and pleasure.

[Quote from melkor](#)

but we are allowed to be political in our own way but not usually discuss it or be very open about it.

So when you say that, that is not what I am saying exactly at all. It's more that there is a time and a place for those actions and discussions, and the organizing principle of the association is going to determine what is appropriate. We **here** at Epicureanfriends.com have more of an educational / teaching function, and so direct political action and identification with only a segment of our target audience would undermine that mission. It's going to be up to each individual to decide whether their political perspective and activity is consistent with what Epicurus taught.

And we shouldn't forget that Epicurus was pretty clear in advocating against a "career" in politics. The "Cincinnatus" model of getting involved to deal with a pressing problem and then pulling back when the problem is over is one thing. But there's a certain type of person who really enjoys "being a politician" and just wants to constantly be involved in running for office and telling other people what to do, and I personally think that that kind of career choice is the most direct danger that Epicurus was warning about.

Maybe I should repeat that the ultimate point about being "NeoEpicurean" would not mean that someone can never be involved in politics. It's more the other ethical issues discussed already, and in fact I would argue that the "never get involved in politics" rule is ITSELF "neo-Epicurean" and not what Epicurus taught.

So personally I could look at someone who was advocating libertarian economics for his local "group," and someone who was advocating socialist economics for his local "group," and I would not necessarily call them neo-Epicurean unless they were arguing that the entire world should live that way, in which case the error would be extending their own preference to the whole world, which would clearly conflict with the Epicurean view of the nature of the universe and views on pleasure, especially the last ten PDs.

Post by "melkor" of May 1, 2020 at 4:02 PM

I may not have been clear before when I stated that we should not discuss politics openly, I meant specifically on this website we shouldn't discuss much of it because this is more of an educational website of a community learning about it and discussing politics could be actively detrimental to that goal. But I am aware that Epicureans may be politically aware and not apolitical, rather, they typically advise against pursuing a career in politics. I wasn't trying to say that you were saying we should avoid being openly political in any sense.

I appreciate the responses, it's made my perspective more clear. I am political, and they are in part guided by my pursuit of pleasure, but I don't believe Epicurus would necessarily agree or follow my own personal views, more likely he would tell me to continue to pursue pleasure and reject ridiculous superstitions.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 4:31 PM

And I think he would tell you too to look for friends in real life who share your perspective on pleasure and how to pursue it, because having friends in real life is essential to living the best life that is possible to you.

And I also think he would tell you to be sure to put enough time also into studying and spreading the philosophical perspective that you think is correct. That's [VS41](#). **We must laugh and philosophize at the same time, and do our household duties, and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.**

I don't know what your thoughts are about how you can personally do that, whether in terms of forming a local meetup group or setting up your own blog or doing your own writing in some other format, but the best way to be sure you understand things yourself is to try to explain them to other people and deal with questions, so if you have any thoughts about how you might pursue that personally in addition to the time you spend here, let us know and we can see how we can help.

And of course continue to spend time here! 😊

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 1, 2020 at 5:50 PM

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".

Post by “Joshua” of May 1, 2020 at 5:55 PM

Excellent thread so far!

Here's a short list off-the-cuff of things I personally consider to be non-negotiable. To be an Epicurean, in other words, is to embrace *at least* the following;

1. A thoroughgoing materialism. A universe that is strictly material, and strictly natural, with no supernatural element whatsoever.
2. A decisive rejection of an afterlife, and of the worry that there is anything to fear in death.
3. A full-throated endorsement of pleasure as the end or telos of human life. Number 3 seems to be the major sticking point for most.

These are not complete and sufficient Epicurean positions, but they are the major necessary ones.

If I added a 4th point, it would be the dismissal of Absolute Justice, Absolute Morality, Virtue, Duty, etc. These are, where they exist at all, conditional and not absolute.

People for whom point number 1 comes naturally find it increasingly difficult to accept 2, 3, and 4 as they move down the list. So they amend the texts, thereby counterfeiting the whole system, and pass it off as authentic.

And of course, I haven't even mentioned the Canon of epistemology!

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2020 at 7:03 PM

Starting first with Joshua's list, I agree that is a very good list of core issues. The one that I think needs to be nearer the top is a combination of the reference to the Canon of epistemology, and item 3 as to the role of pleasure, which when added together are a statement of the supremacy of the importance of "feeling" over "logic" and the subservient role of "logic" or "abstract reason" or whatever you want to call systems of reasoning which do not require immediate and close confirmation through the senses, including the feeling of pain and pleasure. I think Epicurus' rejection of "reason" in the Platonic and Aristotelian role it was playing are probably as much or more explosive an issue with many people than is the role of pleasure, but they are closely related.

But in general yes I think my list would be very similar to that of Joshua.

Now to tackle the many aspects of Nate's post 😊

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2020 at 7:38 PM

I think I really agree with most everything I am reading in Nate's post, and the angle in which I would elaborate on it is the issue of who it is that "we" would constitute in terms of the purpose of Epicureanfriends.com and what "we" are doing in our work here.

The issue of labels is pretty complex so I want to focus on how to apply Nate's points to "us." I consider "us" to be people who are really working to reconnect and extend the work of the original Epicurean school. For whatever reason, even if you want to consider something as

mundane as "identifying" with a football or sports team (but I think it's much more profound than that) there is a group of people who really want to focus first on identifying and understanding what Epicurus taught, and then deciding whether they accept it, rather than approaching philosophy as a smorgasbord of offerings from which we can pick and choose at our own time and pace and apply to our own lives as we wish. This latter type of person is primarily eclectic and more interested in consuming and going his or her own way, and I really have no issue with that. To each his own and all that. For search a person the term "neoEpicurean" should not be seen as offensive because he's no more or less neoEpicurean than he is neoStoic or NeoAristelian or anything else.

Then there are those of us who are content to focus on one school so we can really learn it, and we get more pleasure out of swimming in a single school than constantly flitting in different directions. There are apparently both kinds of fish in the world, and I don't think either path is inherently inferior or superior. But for those of us who are convinced that swimming in a single school is our most efficient path toward what we perceive to be our desired goal, it is much more important to understand the core issues and have consistent positions that can be used to evaluate new and different issues, than it is to constantly interchange among and between schools searching to choose what we may think is "the best from each" before we have really become persuaded that we know what "the best" really is.

So in reconnecting with the original Epicurean school there are benefits and pitfalls in spending significant time in talking about competing viewpoints. Some people enjoy that and insist on it, but I am convinced that many people find that to be distracting and distasteful - they want to focus on "one thing at a time" and understand it as completely as possible before they move on to something else.

So I guess what I am saying is that I don't see the issue of "neo-Epicurean" as necessarily a put-down, though clearly it can have that connotation IF you start from the position that consistency is a virtue. That's really the point - the "neo-Epicureans" are not generally as nearly concerned about consistency as some other people are, so their standard of what can be incorporated is a lot wider than is the standard of some other people.

For me, it is easy to look at anyone who wants to talk about issues in physics and say "so long as your issues are still within the strictly natural explanations of the universe, and you do not open the door to the supernatural, then your discussions are fine and I am sure Epicurus would have approved."

But that's kind of begging the question, because the harder issues (or so that is my disposition) are in ethics and epistemology, and that's where efforts to incorporate what might be called "psychology" are much more fraught with danger, because it's the "direction" of the other philosophies that cause the major incompatibilities.

I think I'll stop for the moment. The real litmus-test / "explosive" issues are getting pretty well fleshed out - they include:

1 - the strict rejection of all supernatural theories

2 - the strict rejection of life after death

3 - the insistence on the central role of feeling (pleasure and pain, widely understood) in constituting the goal of life (which people call "happiness")

4 - the recognition that because pleasure is the only standard given by nature of what to choose is pleasure, all other considerations (virtue, revelation, etc) are subservient to pleasure.

5 - the recognition that pleasure and pain are not limited to immediate bodily sensations but include EVERYTHING we find desirable in life for itself, whether "bodily" or mental/emotional/spiritual or whatever name you want to attach to it.

6 - the epistemological emphasis on the three categories of the canon as primary over logic/reason,

There are as Joshua said a lot more things to include, but these continue to be the hot button issues.

One more thing in relation to "logic" - I think there is a lot to be gained from exploring the intersection of logic and physics more closely. The reason I regularly push back on the "eternal" universe issue is that I think that this involves a choice that Epicurus saw as essential to human psychology and to defeating skepticism. We are always going to want more information than is available to us, and I don't think we yet appreciate that this was a key to Epicurus as it was. We're not EVER going to solve questions of "origin of the universe" because we cannot go back in time and "see" what happened ourselves, so there will always be doubt. And I think Epicurus held that this is an issue of "logic" or however you want to frame the mental question: "How do you live with questions that are important but to which you will never really know a 'final' answer?"

And I think when we drill into the texts on epistemology what emerges is a kind of attitude toward "confidence" that has to take precedence in the end over "let's go look for the person who is most 'expert' in physics and ask him what he thinks." We may be here talking about some of DeWitt's comments about Epicurean versions of "faith" or we may be talking about the details of Philodemus "On Methods of Inference," or we may be talking about something else, but ultimately there are implications of the conflict between "logic" and "the Epicurean canon" in which Epicurus seems to advise (and I think I agree) that the canon must be held to supercede and call a halt to unending skepticism and possibilities for questioning on issues like infinity and eternity.

I won't go further with that now but I think it relates to the issue of how wide a net we can cast in talking productively about other philosophies and incorporating their teachings. Maybe the point is that to Epicurus I don't think it was any more important to know everything there is to know about competing philosophies than it is to know everything about physics. For most people all we can do is grasp the basic outlines of the issues, form a conclusion about the general issue, and go with it. So the first task of the ancient Epicurean school seems to have been to educate its people on all of the fundamental issues, show them in general why their position was superior, educate them to the general attacks they would receive and how to respond to them, and then go out and live as "happily" as possible.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 7:42 PM

[melkor](#) - Thank you again for your question. We started the thread back in January but only when you asked your question today did we really get off the ground, and this discussion we're having now is what I always hoped we would have from it.

Also to add in this point, there is a lot of parallel in what we are discussing now to the issues raised in [Lucian's Hermotimus](#) which I think is one of his best dialogs. He really dives well into the issue of how you can judge among competing philosophies before you are an expert in each one.

I am looking for another quote but here is an important one, because it not only talks about this difficulty of consistency, but it also very interestingly veers into opposition to "weird geometry" which I think is an artifact of the general Epicurean resistance to "expert opinion" not tied to evidence of the senses:

Quote

Perhaps an illustration will make my meaning clearer: when one of those audacious poets affirms that there was once a three-headed and six-handed man, if you accept that quietly without questioning its possibility, he will proceed to fill in the picture consistently—six eyes and ears, three voices talking at once, three mouths eating, and thirty fingers instead of our poor ten all told; if he has to fight, three of his hands will have a buckler, wicker targe, or shield apiece, while of the other three one swings an axe, another hurls a spear, and the third wields a sword. It is too late to carp at these details, when they come; they are consistent with the beginning; it was about that that the question ought to have been raised whether it was to be accepted and passed as true. Once grant that, and the rest comes flooding in, irresistible, hardly now

susceptible of doubt, because it is consistent and accordant with your initial admissions. That is just your case; your love-yearning would not allow you to look into the facts at each entrance, and so you are dragged on by consistency; it never occurs to you that a thing may be self-consistent and yet false; if a man says twice five is seven, and you take his word for it without checking the sum, he will naturally deduce that four times five is fourteen, and so on ad libitum. **This is the way that weird geometry proceeds: it sets before beginners certain strange assumptions, and insists on their granting the existence of inconceivable things, such as points having no parts, lines without breadth, and so on, builds on these rotten foundations a superstructure equally rotten, and pretends to go on to a demonstration which is true, though it starts from premisses which are false.**

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 7:52 PM

Here is the part of the Hermotimus dialog which addresses the problem of everyone pointing to their own school as the way to the truth, and the traveler not knowing which one to believe as the best guide:

Quote

Lycinus. Now, so far as promises and professions go, there is no lack of guides; there are numbers of them waiting about, all representing themselves as from there. But instead of one single road there seem to be many different and inconsistent ones. North and South, East and West, they go; one leads through meadows and vegetation and shade, and is well watered and pleasant, with never a stumbling-block or inequality; another is rough and rocky, threatening heat and drought and toil. Yet all these are supposed to lead to the one city, though they take such different directions.

[26] That is where my difficulty lies; whichever of them I try, there is sure to be a most respectable person stationed just at the entrance, with a welcoming hand and an exhortation to go his way; each of them says he is the only one who knows the straight road; his rivals are all mistaken, have never been themselves, nor learnt the way from competent guides. I go to his neighbor, and he gives the same assurances about his way, abusing the other respectable persons; and so the next, and the next, and the next. This multiplicity and dissimilarity of the roads gives me searchings of heart, and still more the assertiveness and self-satisfaction of the guides; I really cannot tell which turning or whose directions are most likely to bring me to the city.

[27] *Hermotimus*. Oh, but I can solve that puzzle for you; you cannot go wrong, if you trust those who have been already.

Lycinus. Which do you mean? those who have been by which road, and under whose guidance? It is the old puzzle in a new form; you have only substituted men for measures.

Hermotimus. How do you mean?

Lycinus. Why, the man who has taken Plato's road and traveled with him will recommend that road; so with Epicurus and the rest; and *you* will recommend your own. How else, *Hermotimus*? it must be so.

Hermotimus. Well, of course.

Lycinus. So you have not solved my puzzle; I know just as little as before which traveler to trust; I find that each of them, as well as his guide, has tried one only, which he now recommends and will have to be the only one leading to the city. Whether he tells the truth I have no means of knowing; that he has attained *some* end, and seen *some* city, I may perhaps allow; but whether he saw the right one, or whether, Corinth being the real goal, he got to Babylon and thought he had seen Corinth—that is still undecided; for surely every one who has seen a city has not seen Corinth, unless Corinth is the only city there is. But my greatest difficulty of all is the absolute certainty that the true road is one; for Corinth is one, and the other roads lead anywhere but to Corinth, though there may be people deluded enough to suppose that the North road and the South road lead equally to Corinth.

Hermotimus. But that is absurd, *Lycinus*; they go opposite ways, you see.

[28] *Lycinus*. Then, my dear good man, this choice of roads and guides is quite a serious matter; we can by no means just follow our noses; we shall be discovering that we are well on the way to Babylon or Bactria instead of to Corinth. Nor is it advisable to toss up, either, on the chance that we may hit upon the right way if we start upon any one at a venture. That is no impossibility; it may have come off once and again in a cycle; but I cannot think we ought to gamble recklessly with such high stakes, nor commit our hopes to a frail craft, like the wise men who went to sea in a bowl; we should have no fair complaint against Fortune, if her arrow or dart did not precisely hit the centre; the odds are ten thousand to one against her; just so the archer in Homer—Teucer, I suppose it was—when he meant to hit the dove, only cut the string, which held it; of course it is infinitely more likely that the point of the arrow will find its billet in one of the numberless other places, than just in that particular central one. And as to the perils of blundering into one of the wrong roads instead of the right one, misled by a belief in the discretion of Fortune, here is an illustration:—it is no easy

matter to turn back and get safe into port when you have once cast loose your moorings and committed yourself to the breeze; you are at the mercy of the sea, frightened, sick and sorry with your tossing about, most likely. Your mistake was at the beginning: before leaving, you should have gone up to some high point, and observed whether the wind was in the right quarter, and of the right strength for a crossing to Corinth, not neglecting, by the way, to secure the very best pilot obtainable, and a seaworthy craft equal to so high a sea.

[29] *Hermotimus*. Much better so, Lycinus. However, I know that, if you go the whole round, you will find no better guides or more expert pilots than the Stoics; if you mean ever to get to Corinth, you will follow them, in the tracks of Chrysippus and Zeno. It is the only way to do it.

Lycinus. Ah, many can play at the game of assertion. Plato's fellow traveler, Epicurus's follower, and all the rest, will tell me just what you do, that I shall never get to Corinth except with whichever of them it is. So I must either believe them all, or disbelieve impartially. The latter is much the safest, until we have found out the truth.

Display More

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2020 at 12:08 PM

In regard to the relationship between logic and reality I have another point: it ought to be clear that to discuss "pleasure is the goal of life" is a logical abstraction itself, and not really something that is "real" - just the same as if we were to say that "virtue" or "being a good person" is "the" goal of life.

The truth is that real people exist only in the present, and our goals are intimately connected with the reality of the present. Our "real" goal at any one moment is very mundane: it is to sleep, or to eat lunch, or to talk to a friend, or take a shower, or squash a bug, or whatever. Yes each of those fall within a framework of pleasure and pain, but that framework is an abstraction created by us for purposes of analysis. Pleasure and pain and bugs and food and showers are all very real, but the idea of abstracting these into a "goal of life" is an aid to our understanding of our place in the universe, an alternative to religion or academic abstractions proposing some other goal, and needs to be seen that way so that we understand the limitations of any discussion of "the goal of life."

It seems to me that it is highly useful to discuss things in these terms so that we can see the error of religion and virtue-based ethics, which are based on "ideals" not grounded in reality. But there is a hazard that we need to keep wary of because by engaging in debate about "the

goal of life" we have entered a playing field set up originally by Platonists and other nonEpicureans where it is very easy to accept their premises and forget that we have abstracted out and left out essential aspects of reality.

I am saying this to emphasize that u think this separates Epicurus from the norm and the constant debating about ideals which we should reject in the first place.

Post by "melkor" of May 2, 2020 at 3:00 PM

Great point Cassius!