

# How Supporters of Epicurus Should Approach The Effect of Modern Scientific Discoveries In Their Promotion of Epicurean Philosophy

**Post by “Philos Armonikos” of August 16, 2020 at 2:13 PM**

I think Cassius and I have basically come to an accord.

I agree that it is pedagogically useful to understand how Epicurus reasoned out the positions on physics that he did, while at the same time using the Canon ourselves today with the information we have available now to re-evaluate (and occasionally dismiss, when relevant) those conclusions.

That is all I wanted to accomplish for this conversation in the first place.

This is leading ultimately to a new discussion which gets at the root of my concerns.

(Cassius, if the following needs to be moved somewhere else, please do so.)

To ask a new question, which likely may have been addressed before, but which I would like to understand for myself, what does it mean to call someone a "neo-Epicurean"?

From etymology, it would appear that the prefix "neo-" just means "new", but of course words develop in different contexts and also it seems the term "New Epicurean" is tolerable, whereas there is a guideline post that specifically rejects "neo-Epicurean" in favor of "Epicurean".

I would like to propose the division of words that implement the prefix "neo-" into two categories: revivalist (i.e. neo-classical, neo-Romantic, etc.) and revisionist (i.e. neo-Kantian, neo-liberal, neo-conservative, etc.).

By my division here, I satisfy both and would therefore classify myself as a neo-Epicurean, in the particular sense that I am for seeking a revival of the Epicurean tradition and also a revision of some of the conclusions of the physics.

We have debated at length as to how I would defend the important conclusions of Epicurus' ethics from a modern scientific standpoint employing Canonical evidence from Darwinian evolution, paleoanthropology and group evolutionary psychology, modern physics, etc., none of which contravene the ultimate metaphysical position of materialism/naturalism, as well as hedonism, which are central to Epicurean philosophy. (I am saying I am using the Canon to ascertain the truth, which makes me at the very least Epicurean.)

If we are satisfied with this understanding of 'neo-Epicurean', then I would invite the admins to omit the clause on 'not neo-Epicurean but Epicurean' on their guidelines page.

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### **Post by “Don” of August 16, 2020 at 2:46 PM**

This probably does belong in a different thread.

I can understand [Philos Armonikos](#) 's distinction between revision and revival and can see both in our endeavors to bring attention to Epicureanism. I think [Cassius](#) is (but correct me if I'm wrong) naming *neo-Epicureans* as those who focus on one aspect of the philosophy and extrapolate that to the be-all and end-all of the philosophy: the minimalists, the tranquilists, etc. But, let's not kid ourselves, we can never truly be Epicureans in the ancient, classical sense. We are not able to - and cannot - recreate the Garden. Our textual sources are too few, our social structure and culture are too different, our scientific understanding is more complex, and so on. However, what we \*can\* do is take those sources and revive/revise a Philosophy that is true to the spirit of Epicurus and something we can believe he would recognize and sanction. We can do this "as if Epicurus were watching."

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 16, 2020 at 5:00 PM**

Yes I am looking for a place to move this thread now, but before i forget I need to comment on this:

#### [Quote from Philos Armonikos](#)

By my division here, I satisfy both and would therefore classify myself as a neo-Epicurean, in the particular sense that I am for seeking a revival of the Epicurean tradition and also a revision of some of the conclusions of the physics.

Philos, you are the first in a while (perhaps ever) to come into our circle so intensely focused on physics. The origin of the labels and the materials on this website on the "Neo-Epicureans" is primarily that there are large numbers of people in academia who reject almost every significant conclusion of Epicurus, but adopt his name in their efforts, because they want to redefine "pleasure" as the equivalent of "absence of pain." That is a HUGE problem and is the core of most every dispute or division that we have ever had in our "circle."

The word "circle" is relevant to your sentence that I quoted. Given that there is no formal "Epicurean School" anymore (Don's point) it is not really logically possible to "revise some of the conclusions of the physics." The Epicurean physics are what they are, and no one is really qualified to say "we are revising position X and it is now position Y."

This is closely related to the issue that you will read about if you refer to the thread entitled [Discussion of the Society of Epicurus' 20 Tenets of 12/21/19](#)

Since we don't have a formal organization with a formal set of mandatory beliefs, it's not really up to us to say what is or is not Epicurean on a very detailed basis.

We've never had a real problem in the past, and I hope and expect in your case it will be the same, accommodating each other on issues like the size of the sun, infinity, indivisibility, etc., because we are not in the business of writing a physics textbook or the like.

None of us (including me) see any real problem with believing that the universe is infinite or atoms are indivisible or not, except as the reasoning process for those conclusions might indicate some form of skepticism or other process that would lead to problems later - and even then we haven't even begun to approach such a point of concern.

You will see some of these issues discussed when we release the latest podcast (32) that we recorded this morning.

But to repeat and re-emphasize the same point, our "Not Neoepicurean" position papers are almost entirely directed toward the "absence of pain" "be a minimalist" "run from all politics" "go live in a cave" approach which is either explicit or implicit in the academic version of Epicurean philosophy prevalent today.

I think I can already firmly predict from the intensity of your views and the things you have said so far that the "neo-epicurean" issues are not a problem for you personally.

And I am surrounding myself by so many scientists that I am beginning to feel outnumbered and questioning my own assessment of the world situation. 😊

But at least at the moment I am still confident that what I wrote earlier about not letting the physicists war with the philosophers is still the best way to go. I remain convinced that outside the "halls of science" the vast majority of the world is taken in by these issues that are primarily "philosophical" rather than physics-oriented.

As we go forward we need a way to articulate this approach that does not involve constantly repeating "On physics point A Epicurus was wrong, on physics point B Epicurus was wrong, on physics point C Epicurus was wrong ad infinitum. If we do that, we really undercut the way our presentation will effect the majority of people. Yes those points are valid and should be made at the proper time and place, but the global issues of supernatural gods, reward/punishment after death, the assertion that all human action is controlled by a hard deterministic fate, the true

nature of "virtue" and its role in making decisions, the role of "abstract logic" and how to weigh it against the sensations, anticipations, and feelings -- all of those are HUGE issues and for better or worse the primary effort and attention of the forums needs to be primarily devoted to those.

Not exclusively, by any means, but just like with "politics" it would be a great pity if we allow ourselves to be too divided on details of physics unless they truly impact these bigger issues.

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### **Post by “Philos Armonikos” of August 16, 2020 at 5:39 PM**

I haven't finished reading your comment yet, but the first thing I want to admit is that you are correct that my wording is imprecise. It is not meaningful to want to 'revise the conclusions of the [old] physics'. They are what they are.

Please allow me to restate that more precisely as: 'drop the literal acceptance as true the conclusions of the old physics', and 'seek to develop a new physics that is consistent with both our Canon, informed by the information we know now.'

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### **Post by “Philos Armonikos” of August 16, 2020 at 5:46 PM**

Okay, I've read to the end now, I don't really have any problems with anything you said.

I can also now 100% stand behind your rebranded title.

Did you want to address at all my self-declaration as "neo-Epicurean" and if or if not that presents any problems?

I think we are using that word to mean different things, so it is likely that there isn't a contention. As you define it, it basically means someone who is appropriating EP to support minimalism or asceticism. I am not a minimalist or an ascetic, nor do I advocate those things within EP.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 16, 2020 at 6:22 PM**

Philos as to the neo-epicurean issue, I think we are almost there on that and almost all other issues.

I do not mean to be condescending by saying this, but I gather that you have not yet had time to spend much time reading the past posts on this site. It's not necessary for you to do that, but I do think that many of these issues will become more clear to you as you read more. I especially recommend [Elayne](#) 's essays on pleasure which are linked to on the first page. You and her have quite a bit in common, but as you will see Elayne is at least as firm as I am on the "absence of pain" issue, even though she is closer to you on the physics issues.

I don't know how much background time you have spent discussing these issues with Hiram, but I think you will see as you read more here how it is we evolved in different directions, and how we are basically going our separate ways. I still wish Hiram well personally and will always consider him to be a friend (at least as much as you can be entirely over the internet having met someone) but you will want to come to understand more about how he diverged from what we are doing here.

As the work week starts I am going to have less concentrated time to respond, but i again repeat that all your topics and questions are of great interest and I think both I and others here will be happy to address them all. These types of discussions are what a forum is designed to facilitate.

As to the specific question about being a "Neo-Epicurean" I don't think we've tried to "trademark" that term in any way, so you do you and use whatever words you like. As you are currently using it I do not see your issues as being the targets of our major concerns, so from that point of view it does not cause a problem. If you are looking for label to describe yourself, however, eventually I think you will be able to do much better than that.

By the way, I started my website using the name New Epicurean from the point of view that I was someone "new" to Epicurean philosophy, and the blog was my running record of my studies into the topic. To me, "neo-Epicurean indicates more of a divergence than someone who is consistent on the core aspects would probably want to convey, because (as I think Martin and Elayne would agree) we don't think that Epicurus ever intended that the scientific discovery part of his philosophy was ever to be frozen in time. That means that if the "neo" is used to indicate mainly the physics updates, I bet an ancient Epicurean would say that that wasn't a necessary prefix..

The term I really have the most issue with is "hedonist." The ancient Epicureans did not seem to use that to refer to themselves, and I think the word obscures critical aspects of the philosophy. And also it's probably true that the Epicureans really did consider their grouping to be related to Epicurus as a particular example, without crossing a line over into cult-like behavior. I tend to equate this in my mind with being a fan of the "Miami Dolphins" or some such. That's a trite example, but I do think that there is a significant aspect in which the real history of Epicurus as a person serves as an example worth emulating from the point of view I'll paraphrase as "reverence for the wise man does the most for the person doing the

reverencing."