

Welcome Cleveland Oakie!

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2021 at 5:57 AM

Welcome [Cleveland Okie](#) !

This is the place for students of Epicurus to coordinate their studies and work together to promote the philosophy of Epicurus. Please remember that all posting here is subject to our [Community Standards / Rules of the Forum](#) our [Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean](#) and our [Posting Policy statements](#) and [associated posts](#).

Please understand that the leaders of this forum are well aware that many fans of Epicurus may have sincerely-held views of what Epicurus taught that are incompatible with the purposes and standards of this forum. This forum is dedicated exclusively to the study and support of people who are committed to classical Epicurean views. As a result, this forum is not for people who seek to mix and match some Epicurean views with positions that are inherently inconsistent with the core teachings of Epicurus.

All of us who are here have arrived at our respect for Epicurus after long journeys through other philosophies, and we do not demand of others what we were not able to do ourselves. Epicurean philosophy is very different from other viewpoints, and it takes time to understand how deep those differences really are. That's why we have membership levels here at the forum which allow for new participants to discuss and develop their own learning, but it's also why we have standards that will lead in some cases to arguments being limited, and even participants being removed, when the purposes of the community require it. Epicurean philosophy is not inherently democratic, or committed to unlimited free speech, or devoted to any other form of organization other than the pursuit by our community of happy living through the principles of Epicurean philosophy.

One way you can be most assured of your time here being productive is to tell us a little about yourself and personal your background in reading Epicurean texts. It would also be helpful if you could tell us how you found this forum, and any particular areas of interest that you have which would help us make sure that your questions and thoughts are addressed.

In that regard we have found over the years that there are a number of key texts and references which most all serious students of Epicurus will want to read and evaluate for themselves. Those include the following.

1. ["Epicurus and His Philosophy"](#) by Norman DeWitt
2. [The Biography of Epicurus by Diogenes Laertius](#). This includes the surviving letters of Epicurus, including those to [Herodotus](#), [Pythocles](#), and [Menoceus](#).

3. ["On The Nature of Things"](#) - by Lucretius (a poetic abridgement of Epicurus' "On Nature")
4. ["Epicurus on Pleasure"](#) - By Boris [Nikolsky](#)
5. The chapters on Epicurus in [Gosling and Taylor's "The Greeks On Pleasure."](#)
6. [Cicero's "On Ends" - Torquatus Section](#)
7. [Cicero's "On The Nature of the Gods" - Velleius Section](#)
8. The Inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda - [Martin Ferguson Smith translation](#)
9. [A Few Days In Athens" - Frances Wright](#)
10. Lucian Core Texts on Epicurus: (1) [Alexander the Oracle-Monger](#), (2) [Hermetimus](#)
11. [Philodemus "On Methods of Inference"](#) (De Lacy version, including his appendix on relationship of Epicurean canon to Aristotle and other Greeks)
12. "The Greeks on Pleasure" -Gosling & Taylor Sections on Epicurus, especially the [section on katastematic and kinetic pleasure](#) which explains why ultimately this distinction was not of great significance to Epicurus.

It is by no means essential or required that you have read these texts before participating in the forum, but your understanding of Epicurus will be much enhanced the more of these you have read.

And time has also indicated to us that if you can find the time to read one book which will best explain [classical Epicurean philosophy](#), as opposed to most modern "eclectic" interpretations of Epicurus, that book is Norman DeWitt's ***Epicurus And His Philosophy.***

Welcome to the forum!

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.

Our Posting Policy At EpicureanFriends.com:

"No Partisan Politics," "No Supernatural Religion," and "No Absolute Virtue"

This forum is dedicated to promoting the philosophy of Epicurus, and not to any partisan political positions whether "left," "right," or "center." The task of rediscovering Epicurean philosophy requires that such discussions be held elsewhere. Posts violating this rule are subject to removal.



Epicurean philosophy firmly rejects the viewpoint that there are any supernatural forces or absolute virtues or Platonic ideals of any kind. Argument which is based on supernatural claims, or "absolute" virtues or ideals of any kind, are in violation of this rule and subject to removal.

Post by "Cleveland Okie" of October 4, 2021 at 9:26 PM

Thanks for the welcome.

How I got here: I have run across references to Epicureanism before that made the philosophy seem interesting, but what sparked my recent concentration was this blog post by Bryan Caplan:

[40 Things I Learned in My First 40 Years - Econlib](#)

Today I turn 40. To ease the pain, I've decided to write a list of important lessons I've learned during my first four decades. In no particular order:...

www.econlib.org

Where he writes, "The best three pages in philosophy remain Epicurus' "Letter to Menoeceus."

I read the letter, I think the version on your website, and I am now almost finished with "Epicurus and the Pleasant Life" by Haris Dimitriades. I have downloaded a copy of the DeWitt book and I plan to read it soon.

Post by "Martin" of October 5, 2021 at 3:49 AM

Welcome Cleveland Okie!

Post by "Cassius" of October 5, 2021 at 5:52 AM

[Quote from Cleveland Okie](#)

Haris Dimitriades.

I've had many good exchanges with Haris over the last ten years via Facebook, and I have his book too. Among the recent ones that focus on the more practical aspect of applying Epicurean philosophy I think his is one of the better ones.

Post by "Cleveland Okie" of October 6, 2021 at 9:40 PM

I've finished "Epicurus and the Pleasant Life." I thought it was quite good, if a little uneven. I particularly liked Chapter 9, the chapter on Pleasure. This is one of the sentences I bookmarked in the chapter: "The wise man creatively leverages the capacity of the mind to look backward and forward, but those who look to the past with bitterness and to the future with fear ran the danger of transforming this ability into a weakness."

And I liked this sentence from Chapter 30: "The physical pleasures through our senses and the mental pleasures through our mind are an endless ocean. All we need to do is become more attentive to the present and not allow ourselves to be pulled out of our ongoing pleasure by fear of future pain."

I'm going to read Norman DeWitt's book next; I'm a little frustrated by not being able to find a Kindle or ePub edition, but I have downloaded a PDF.

One of the reasons Epicureanism is attractive to me is many of the doctrines fit with conclusions I already had reached. For example, his advice not to become obsessed with politics seems more relevant than ever in the current age; I sometimes feel I am the only person in the U.S. who doesn't endlessly post political talking points on Facebook, repeating slogans from a favorite political TV network.

In my day job, I come into contact a lot with people affected by the opioid crisis. Epicurus wasn't talking about heroin, I guess, but addiction to hard drugs seems exactly like the kind of pleasures that are not worth indulging in. It's hard to enjoy looking at a sunset or talking to a pretty girl if you are dead from an overdose.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2021 at 10:24 PM

Cleveland you will find DeWitt's book to be significantly different in nature. It has been a while since I read Haris' book, but i recall it to be more focused on practical advice, much along the lines you quote.

DeWitt's book is more of an encyclopedic treatment of the history and theory of Epicurean philosophy. It will give you the foundation on which the philosophy is built and explain the many details that are very unfamiliar to most of us as we approach the philosophy for the first time. I recall that Haris does go over the outlines, but i think you will find that Dewitt really puts Epicurus in context with a general philosophical framework.

As we tell everybody please let us know if you have comments or questions as you read it. We have a whole section of the forum here devoted to discussing it chapter by chapter. You may find some things already there that will help you, but it's of great help to us if you make new

comments or ask new questions as you read through it, so be sure to do that if you're at all inclined to.

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of October 17, 2021 at 12:48 AM

Cassius, I have been reading DeWitt's book, a chapter a day, and I'm about halfway through. It's a very good backgrounder on the philosopher and the philosophy, so it's a good early book to read, but I think my main interest is, as you put it, to "focus on the more practical aspect of applying Epicurean philosophy." What is your favorite among books that do that?

Post by “Cassius” of October 17, 2021 at 3:46 AM

That's a very good question! I am not sure that there are any that strike me as satisfying on that score as well as DeWitt does on the background, but because I trust his consistency I would probably say Haris Dimitriadis' book as found at Epicurusphilosophy.com.

I would be curious at any comments from others in answer to this question.

I would also rank Catherine Wilson's books as better than many, although with her i.have to warn that (as with many others) there is a tendency to equate the writers moral/political views as those of Epicurus.

For that reason despite its emphasis on theory I think that someone who takes to heart the basic principles DeWitt discussed, and honestly sits back and asks "How would I be living today if I had been taught these things from childhood?" is far ahead of the game.

The standard suggestions you will read about "simple loving" and the like in other books can indeed be helpful, but the danger is that each if us have different circumstances, and too cookie-cutter an effort to implement them is not a good idea. On that score [VS63](#) is always good to remember!

I think the true benefit of Epicurus is in helping you reprogram your mind on the ultimate issues of life, and once one does that the immediate practical decisions fall into place very naturally.

Post by “Cassius” of October 17, 2021 at 3:51 AM

Oh gosh I am writing this at 4:00 am and just noticed in the thread that you have already read Haris' book!

Maybe it would help if you told us about particular areas of interest?

Post by “Godfrey” of October 17, 2021 at 11:53 AM

Personally I haven't found a good book on how to practice EP: I think we need to write one 😊

I agree with Cassius that a major part of the process is just changing or fine tuning your world view. I'm also finding that the more that I live with that world view the clearer the practical details become and the better I'm able to interpret the nuances of the doctrines. But, at least for me, it's a long process and one that I'm still in the middle of.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 17, 2021 at 9:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The standard suggestions you will read about "simple loving" and the like in other books

?

...please explain, or if you can reference to a link in the forum explaining this, thanks

Post by “Don” of October 17, 2021 at 9:22 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The standard suggestions you will read about "simple loving" and the like in other books

?

...please explain, or if you can reference to a link in the forum explaining this, thanks

I was going to ask [Cassius](#) the same question.

Post by "Joshua" of October 17, 2021 at 9:30 PM

Quote

simple loving



I feel certain that he meant to type "[Simple living](#)".

Post by "Don" of October 17, 2021 at 9:31 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

Quote

simple loving



I feel certain that he meant to type "[Simple living](#)".

LOL!!! That makes sense now! 

Post by “Cassius” of October 17, 2021 at 9:34 PM

OMG what a terrible typo! Though come to think of it maybe it was a Freudian slip! Simple loving without the romantic overload might be just what the doctor ordered! 😊

Post by “Don” of October 17, 2021 at 10:04 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

OMG what a terrible typo! Though come to think of it maybe it was a Freudian slip! Simple loving without the romantic overload might be just what the doctor ordered! 😊

Let's stick with "it's a typo" for now 😊

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of October 18, 2021 at 9:28 PM

It looks like the only recommendations I'm getting are Catherine Wilson's books, so I will try them next.

What do you guys think of Hiram Crespo's book, "Tending the Epicurean Garden"?

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of October 18, 2021 at 9:32 PM

Oh, I see you've created a useful thread!

Thread

[Modern Books on "Practical Advice" On Applying Epicurean Philosophy](#)

Let's see if we can prepare a list of "modern" books to mention in a list of those for people to consider on the "practical side." We can edit and update this list as more

are added. Links are to the book's location at Amazon.com:

Please included in the thread below any you would like to add to this list, plus give your comment on it. Thanks!

1. Haris Dimitriadis ([Epicurus and the Pleasant Life - A Philosophy of Nature](#)" and "[Death is Nothing To Fear](#)")
2. Catherine Wilson ([How To Be An Epicurean](#)

...



Cassius

October 18, 2021 at 9:25 AM

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 18, 2021 at 9:56 PM

I found Catherine Wilson's book "How to be an Epicurean: the Art of Ancient Art of Living Well" at my library. Skimmed through rather quickly, and returned it also rather quickly. It had a "fluffy" feeling to it...I think it's better to read the Principle Doctrines and contemplate their deeper meanings and how they can be applied to one's own life. Yet, if you can easily find it a library, could be good if you like things that have a "self-help" quality. (Been there, done that, too many times already).

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 18, 2021 at 10:03 PM

Just for the record, realize that I shouldn't put down "self-help" books, as I've found great benefits in the past, seen many a time when just the right self-help book came along...it's just really a matter of personal reference.

Post by “Don” of October 19, 2021 at 7:12 AM

I agree that that's the general tone of Wilson's book. For someone who's never heard of Epicureanism, maybe it could be an entry point for further exploration? From my perspective, that's why it's important. It's really the first book to get some popular press coverage for Epicureanism after the glut of Stoicism books for so long.

Post by “Cassius” of October 19, 2021 at 7:36 AM

Yes "fluffy" is a very good term for it. I've watched some of Wilson's videos and I do tend to think that she gives a good "vibe" as being a nice person and "gets it" better than do some of the others. But I don't think she's primarily into Epicurus as much as she is into general philosophy, and so she comes across as more cautious than she would otherwise.

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of October 21, 2021 at 9:52 AM

A few observations/questions:

1. I'm most of the way through DeWitt's book, and in Chapter 14 he writes of Epicurus, "He favored a minimum of government and chose to look upon men as free individuals in a society transcending local political boundaries." Is this an eccentric opinion of DeWitt's, or would most experts on Epicurus describe him as a kind of libertarian or classical liberal? It is interesting to me that my current intense interest in Epicureanism was spurred by Bryan Caplan's recommendation that everyone read the "Letter to Menoeceus." (Caplan is a libertarian blogger, college professor and author. Many of his views are decidedly Epicurean, i.e. he stresses the importance of friendship.)
2. Now that I know more about Epicureanism, thanks to DeWitt's book, I have to say that the Epicurean position that puzzles me the most is the denunciation of mathematics. Is there an ancient Greek cultural context here that I'm not getting?
3. About sex, same question. Is Epicurus negative toward sex because he opposed older men hitting on young boys, or is there something else at work here? I don't see how, for example, married sex would contradict Epicurean principles.
4. I didn't really get an answer to my query about Hiram Crespo's book, but related to that, I was browsing on Kindle the other night and I ran across Cassius' "Elemental Epicureanism" and bought it for 99 cents. At that price, and with its collection of basic texts, it ought to be

recommended to every new person joining this website. I'll note that an "H. Crespo" recommended it and gave it five stars.

Post by "Cassius" of October 21, 2021 at 10:49 AM

Cleveland those are great questions. I am in the car today but will respond in full asap because I want to address each one at length.

Post by "Joshua" of October 21, 2021 at 10:58 AM

I'll take a shot at some of these;

Quote

1. I'm most of the way through DeWitt's book, and in Chapter 14 he writes of Epicurus, "He favored a minimum of government and chose to look upon men as free individuals in a society transcending local political boundaries." Is this an eccentric opinion of DeWitt's, or would most experts on Epicurus describe him as a kind of libertarian or classical liberal?

While we do heavily push DeWitt as the best introduction to Epicurean Philosophy, many of us also recognize his tendency in several ways to extrapolate beyond the textual evidence. I cannot recall a citation in the relevant texts where this opinion is directly expressed.

Complicating the problem are several historical facts worth mentioning. First, and in support of DeWitt's assertion, we do know that Epicurus chose to settle in democratic Athens. He had other options, some of which had more centralized governments. (I'll also mention that we try to avoid the thorny issue of politics on this forum, for what I think are obvious reasons.)

The second factor is that capitalism as we understand it did not exist, and had not been proposed. Further, Epicurus himself held slaves; it's difficult in any age to hold liberty as a strong value when slavery is *de rigeur*. There are no classical texts from any author surviving which propose abolitionism as an object. The ancients simply saw these issues differently than we do.

Quote

2. Now that I know more about Epicureanism, thanks to DeWitt's book, I have to say that the Epicurean position that puzzles me the most is the denunciation of mathematics. Is there a ancient Greek cultural context here that I'm not getting?

There certainly is! Epicurus lived in a demon-haunted age, and Mathematics were not exempt from this broader context. Pythagoras had proposed a connection between geometry and the "10 concentric celestial spheres". His claim was not only about geometry and astronomy, but about "Truth". Plato as well saw a connection between Euclidean geometric theorems, and the kind of pure absolute moral theory that he himself was dabbling in; hence the sign over his door—"Let no man enter here who has not studied geometry".

This will help to indicate the other problem with Mathematics—namely, that the Ancient Greeks had no real taste for their practical application. As an example of this; the Alexandrians *had* done the work of developing an understanding of pneumatics and hydraulics, and they even devised a basic steam engine. And what did they use things for? Tricks and sorcery to complement the charlatanism of the temples and oracles.

Yes, that's right; they were *one* step away from attaching a piston and a wheel to this contraption, by which effort they could have discovered locomotive power! But they didn't.

Epicurus did not have time for philosophy that did not invite a practical application. He was surrounded by geometers, and at the end of all their inquiries they were finding God.

He knew they were on the wrong track entirely, and so dismissed them.

Post by “Joshua” of October 21, 2021 at 11:10 AM

"I know that I am by nature mortal, and ephemeral—but when I trace at my leisure the windings to and fro of the heavenly bodies, my feet no longer touch the Earth, but I stand in the presence of Zeus Himself and take my fill of ambrosia."

-Claudius Ptolemy, *Almagest*

This is sort of what I mean by "finding god" in mathematics.

Post by “Joshua” of October 21, 2021 at 11:12 AM

As a Land Surveyor, I'm plotting an essay on precisely this subject. I had an idea for a title;
'Angles and Demons'

Post by "Godfrey" of October 21, 2021 at 12:21 PM

Regarding politics, I agree with [Joshua](#) that Epicurus pre-dated much of today's political and economic theory and therefore it's a bit of a stretch to make a case for him espousing libertarianism, Marxism or any other current or recent ideology.

For my own curiosity about an Epicurean take on politics, I've just begun reading Wilson's How To Be An Epicurean. I've been avoiding that book because it veers into politics, but since it was listed in the recent thread on books on practical EP I figured I'd give it a chance.

Some comments on the first pages of the book. Wilson clearly states that the book is her take on EP and that not everyone will agree with her. Paraphrasing another statement of hers, the value of studying a philosophy is in learning to think for oneself, not in becoming a follower. I find this line of thinking refreshing, particularly when considering the oft expressed desire for Epicurean "spiritual exercises" along the lines of Stoic practices.

But I digress. Comments on Wilson probably belong in another thread. I just wanted to mention her as someone to read for an alternate take on reading politics into EP.

Post by "Cassius" of October 21, 2021 at 3:51 PM

Very good comments from Joshua and Godfrey. I think I agree with all of them so I won't repeat that part in what I write:

1. I'm most of the way through DeWitt's book, and in Chapter 14 he writes of Epicurus, "He favored a minimum of government and chose to look upon men as free individuals in a society transcending local political boundaries." Is this an eccentric opinion of DeWitt's, or would most experts on Epicurus describe him as a kind of libertarian or classical liberal? It is interesting to me that my current intense interest in Epicureanism was spurred by Bryan Caplan's recommendation that everyone read the "Letter to Menoeceus." (Caplan is a libertarian blogger, college professor and author. Many of his views are decidedly Epicurean, i.e. he stresses the importance of friendship.)

Response One: Again I agree with Godfrey and Joshua and think that (1) it is hard to apply the systems Epicurus was involved in to modern systems. And (2) I think ultimately we have to look to Epicurus' position on Justice to see that he was very flexible and I think he would say that the system of government that is most appropriate depends on the facts. But I also do think that it is fair to infer that as for Epicurus himself and his friends, they who were often simple in their tastes, self-sufficient, etc. would naturally be attracted to themselves live under a system that reflected those simple and "live and let live tastes." So I think it's understandable how "libertarians" today can see commonalities in their views with those of Epicurus, but they shouldn't take it too far. Epicurus was above all practical, and interested in the results in action, and he would not likely say "Everyone in the world ought to live as me and my friends in Athens in 300 BC preferred to live." So in thinking that Epicurus endorsed their political viewpoints, I think they would be in error, just as would be almost everyone who tries to enlist Epicurus for their applied political viewpoints.

2. Now that I know more about Epicureanism, thanks to DeWitt's book, I have to say that the Epicurean position that puzzles me the most is the denunciation of mathematics. Is there an ancient Greek cultural context here that I'm not getting?

Response 2: Be sure to see the material in our recent thread on Epicurus and Propositional Logic: [Propositional Logic, Truth Tables, and Epicurus' Objection to "Dialectic"](#) And also these threads: [Explaining Epicurus' Position On The "Size of the Sun" And Related Issues of Speculative Math / Geometry](#) The basic point is that "science" is very similar to "wisdom" in virtue- no "system" is fully accurate to the facts of reality, and those limitations must always be remembered. The same goes especially for mathematics, which allows us to create "models" but not duplicate reality. People who forget those limitations lose themselves in pursuit of ideal forms which do not exist in reality.

3. About sex, same question. Is Epicurus negative toward sex because he opposed older men hitting on young boys, or is there something else at work here? I don't see how, for example, married sex would contradict Epicurean principles.

Response 3: I think it is most accurate to say that Epicurus cautioned that care be used in sex just as he would or did in terms of alcohol or any other high-risk activities that tend toward intoxication. Intoxication makes it difficult for us to be honest in predicting the results of our actions - in answering the question "What will happen to me if I choose this course of action?" Epicurus warned against the pain that comes from intoxicated pursuit of sex / romance but he did not condemn the pleasure itself, and he recognized sex for one of the real hallmark experiences of life by which we know ultimately what pleasure is. "The pleasure of sex" is a feeling that is hard to fail to feel and understand, so I think the best way to appreciate Epicurus on this is that he is always reminding us that all pleasures are desirable, but some bring the danger of more pain than others do, and the fact of life is that this is a pleasure to handle with

great care.

4. I didn't really get an answer to my query about Hiram Crespo's book, but related to that, I was browsing on Kindle the other night and I ran across Cassius' "Elemental Epicureanism" and bought it for 99 cents. At that price, and with its collection of basic texts, it ought to be recommended to every new person joining this website. I'll note that an "H. Crespo" recommended it and gave it five stars.

Response 4: My "books" are little more than compilations and the only reason there is a charge for any of them is that I couldn't figure out way to get them on Kindle without there being a charge. If you get any benefit from them I will be glad but they all need dramatic revision - which I hope to do someday. As to Hiram's book that is a complicated subject. A significant number of people find that it contains helpful suggests for the pursuit of pleasure, but it was not written as a basic textbook (such as the DeWitt book) and it should not be depended upon for basic theory. The people who like it the most are generally those who read it first, and before they read DeWitt or some other book on theory. Those who read DeWitt or other reliable theory generally I find to be less well disposed toward it. Anyone who is interested in reading about the differences between Hiram's approach and those of most of us at this forum would do well to read this thread: [Discussion of the Society of Epicurus' 20 Tenets of 12/21/19](#)

If I missed something let me know and I will come back to it!

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of October 21, 2021 at 5:16 PM

Thank you very much to everyone for taking the time to offer thoughtful replies, and I also will follow the links you guys offer when I get time.

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of November 8, 2021 at 10:29 PM

Just wanted to log that I am plugging away on my reading. I finished DeWitt's book and now tonight I finished Catherine Wilson's "Very Short Introduction" book. Wilson's book is not bad, but I thought DeWitt's was more interesting.

I have "How To Be An Epicurean" on hold at the library, so that will be next.

Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2021 at 5:47 AM

That's great! Let us know your thoughts and any questions of particular interest as you read through them. That's what we're here for!

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of November 9, 2021 at 5:14 PM

Of possible related interest: One of the reasons I enjoyed the DeWitt book is that I like reading about classical history and culture anyway: I just finished reading "Five Roman Lives," a recent translation of five of Plutarch's lives: Pompey, Caesar, Cicero, Brutus and Antony, and the lives sometimes mention Epicureans. Apparently at least some of Caesar's assassins were Epicureans; a book I have on hold at the library, "The Last Assassin: The hunt for the killers of Julius Caesar" by Peter Stothard apparently goes into some detail on that.

I was surprised that the "Very Short Introduction to Epicureanism" doesn't mention DeWitt's book. So I looked up Epicureanism in my third edition of the Oxford Classical Dictionary, and it doesn't mention the book either!

As I've been invited to submit questions, I did have one: Has anyone seen any evidence that Epicurus might have been influenced by Buddhism? Of course, Epicurus did not advocate either indulgence or extreme ascetism but recommend a sensible middle course, and I'm struck by how his actual advice (as opposed to misconceptions) is rather reminiscent of the Middle Way of Buddhism. Siddhartha of course was raised in luxury and experimented with ascetism and ultimately rejected both.

Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2021 at 6:48 PM

You will get lots of takers on the Buddhism question so I will leave that to others.

On the DeWitt book, as you read more of the "conventional" commentary you will see why Dewitt is both held in disrepute in the "establishment" and why some of us like him!

As for Caesar, there were probably Epicureans on both sides of that.

Post by “Joshua” of November 9, 2021 at 6:48 PM

Quote

As I've been invited to submit questions, I did have one: Has anyone seen any evidence that Epicurus might have been influenced by Buddhism?

Good question! This is rather complicated, but the short answer is "probably not". This could be a long post...

Alexander the Great

Epicurus was living and working in the late fourth century and early 3rd century BCE. Gautama Buddha lived somewhere between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE.

There *was* a very gradual inter-fluence of Greek and Indian thought starting *possibly* with the Presocratics (more on that in a bit), but not coming to a head until Alexander the Great's Indian Campaign in 327 BCE, 14 years after Epicurus' birth. Epicurus *did* muster for the mandatory two-year Athenian military training at his coming of age, but he never campaigned as a soldier.

Bactria

When I say that the Greco-Indian exchange of ideas was gradual, I do mean that in every sense. Bactria in Central Asia (Afghanistan and other parts of the present-day Middle East) was on the far-flung limits of the frontier of Greek civilization. Even to get that far, you had to cover the whole breadth of Persia.

Having gotten that far, there was even more trouble ahead; between Bactria and India there still lay the formidable barrier of the towering peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains. There was no direct sea-route to India from the Mediterranean until the construction of the Suez Canal in the 1860s. There was, in Antiquity, an overland route over this same land-bridge, and one of Alexander's dreams in founding Alexandria was to fully exploit it. This did happen eventually, for a few hundred years, but not in a systematic way until well after Epicurus' death. Egypt before the Ptolemies was a civilization in what appeared to be terminal decline—a mere vassal of the Persians.

King Ashoka

Nor did Buddhism even spread throughout India until quite late in Antiquity; the key figure in its spread was King Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire, who didn't come to power until 2 years before Epicurus died. Ashoka, in a spirit of innovation prefiguring Constantine, took the unusual step of establishing Buddhism as the Imperial State Religion.

The earliest surviving artefacts of Greco-Buddhist art date from the 1st to 3rd centuries CE. Now, to be fair, very little Greek art in general survives from the time of Epicurus. Most of what we know about it comes from the Roman copies that were made starting sometime around the late 2nd/1st centuries BCE, and on through the Imperial Period.

The Ionian School

I mentioned the Presocratics earlier. I will lay the groundwork here by talking a little bit about the philosophical tradition that Epicureanism stems from. Epicurus himself was an Athenian citizen by birth, but not a resident; he was born on Samos at the Eastern extent of the Aegean. This cluster of islands off the Greek mainland (known collectively as Ionia) experienced a cultural flourishing in the centuries preceding Epicurus' birth, a flourishing that predated the flowering of Athens, and that had its center in the city of Miletus on the Greek coast of Asia Minor.

The 'Ionian School', as it is sometimes called, was quite unusual in its approach to philosophy—particularly when compared with the later Platonic style. Where logic and dialectic would come to rule in Athens, the Ionians *tended* (though not universally) to prefer the direct experience of nature, and to make inferences about the physical laws that governed it. If Socrates and Plato are the fathers of Dialectic Philosophy, it was the Ionians who took the first faltering steps toward physical science.

There was Anaximander, who drew the first map of the world and concluded that it was spherical; Xenophanes, an early agnostic; Heraclitus, who intuited that all things in nature are in motion; Anaxagoras, who supposed that the sun was not divine at all, but simply a huge, burning stone; Empedocles, who thought that the Cosmos was uncreated and eternal; and, most importantly for us, Democritus and Leucippus, who posited that all bodies are made of indivisible atoms suspended in void.

Democritus

Quote

By convention sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour; in reality atoms and void.

Of these last, Democritus is better attested. He was said to have been born into a wealthy family. Rather than building on that legacy, he chose instead to use his inheritance to fund his particular avocation—the pursuit of philosophy, wherever on Earth that might lead him.

He traveled far and wide; Assyria, Babylon, Egypt—even, it is rumored, as far away as Ethiopia on the east coast of Africa, and, yes, to India.

Since Democritus was Epicurus' most important source (despite the latter's protestations), it would do well to dwell on this Indian connection.

Unfortunately, we cannot! There is but a hint that Democritus ever made it that far. Even if he had, the topic on which Epicurus most seriously diverges from Democritus is precisely Ethics, the subject we are reviewing now. Had Epicurus stuck with Democritean atomic-determinism, it might be interesting to address Indian concepts like *Karma* in light of that. But Epicurus forged his own path; a radical embrace of free-will.

That's a lot for now. I will try to return to this thread in a day or two and outline what I think are key differences between Epicurean and Buddhist thought.

(I have no qualifications to do so, by the way, except that I was once a Secular Buddhist and am now an Epicurean.)

-josh

Post by “Joshua” of November 9, 2021 at 7:00 PM

And by the by, [Cleveland Okie](#), if you ever run short of reading material, *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria* has become far and away my favorite history book on Hellenistic thought. The near-total lack of any material on Epicurus or on Buddhism will not satisfy as an answer to your question, but there's a good deal of interesting stuff on Alexander the Great, the Ptolemaic dynasty, and the Great Library.

Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2021 at 8:07 PM

Wow Cleveland you inspired quite a history lesson from JJ there! 😊

Post by “Don” of November 9, 2021 at 8:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Wow Cleveland you inspired quite a history lesson from JJ there! 😊

Yes, [Joshua](#) , that was excellent!!!

Post by “Don” of November 9, 2021 at 8:54 PM

Personally, I'm more inclined to believe that any perceived similarities between Buddhism and Epicureanism are due to convergent evolution rather than direct contact. What works, works, regardless of the geography or time period.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 9, 2021 at 10:10 PM

There's a book titled Greek Buddha, by Christopher Beckwith, that describes how Pyrrho spent several years with Alexander and studied the version of Buddhism existing at that time. He proposes that there may have been cross pollination between Pyrrho and the Buddhists.

I believe that DL mentions that Epicurus was an admirer of Pyrrho. If all of this was so, I can imagine that Epicurus made improvements to Pyrrho's ideas in the same way that he did to Democritus' ideas. For example, as I understand Buddhism, a goal is to eliminate desire (which is of course impossible: you really have to desire to eliminate desire in order to eliminate desire!). Epicurus came up with an elegant and more evidence based theory of the various types of desire. But this is speculation on my part and I gather that Beckwith's book is controversial.

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of November 9, 2021 at 10:53 PM

Thank you, Josh, and thank you everyone! That was quite a lesson, as Cassius says, and I will keep the recommendation in mind for the book about Alexandria.

Post by “Don” of November 10, 2021 at 3:32 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I believe that DL mentions that Epicurus was an admirer of Pyrrho.

[Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, BOOK IX, Chapter 11. PYRRHO \(c. 360-270 b.c.\)](#)

In debate he was looked down upon by no one, for he could both discourse at length and also sustain a cross-examination, so that even Nausiphanes when a young man was captivated by him : at all events he used to say that we should follow Pyrrho in disposition but himself in doctrine ; and he would often remark that Epicurus, greatly admiring Pyrrho's way of life, regularly asked him for information about Pyrrho ; and that he was so respected by his native city that they made him high priest, and on his account they voted that all philosophers should be exempt from taxation.

[Pyrrho \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Pyrrho's Influence

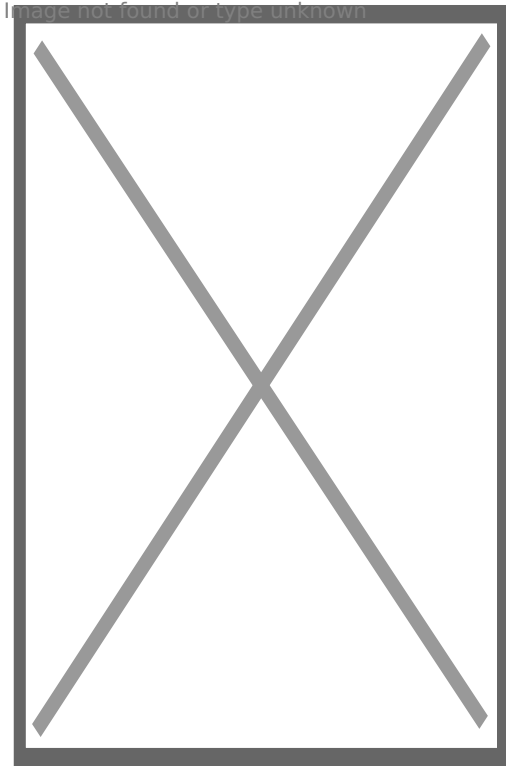
Pyrrho's relation to the later Pyrrhonists has already been discussed. Given the importance of Pyrrhonism in earlier modern philosophy, Pyrrho's indirect influence may be thought of as very considerable. But beyond his being adopted as a figurehead in later Pyrrhonism—itsself never a widespread philosophical movement — Pyrrho seems to have had very little impact in the ancient world after his own lifetime. Both Cicero and Seneca refer to Pyrrho as a neglected figure without a following, and the surviving testimonia do not contradict this impression. It is possible that he had some influence on the form of scepticism adopted by Arcesilaus and other members of the Academy; the extent to which this is so is disputed and difficult to assess. It is also possible that the Epicureans, whose aim was also *ataraxia*, learned something from Pyrrho; there are indications of an association between Pyrrho and Nausiphanes, the teacher of Epicurus. But if so, the extent of the Epicureans' borrowing was strictly limited. For them, *ataraxia* is to be attained by coming to understand that the universe consists of atoms and void; and the Epicureans' attitude towards the senses was anything but one of mistrust.

Post by “Don” of November 10, 2021 at 7:16 AM

[Quote from Cleveland Okie](#)

the recommendation in mind for the book about Alexandria.

I'd also add this recommendation:



[The Darkening Age - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)
en.wikipedia.org

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of November 11, 2021 at 10:04 AM

Thank you for the book recommendations, Don, and I'll also look up Epicurus at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of December 4, 2021 at 12:49 PM

I have just finished "How to Be an Epicurean: The Ancient Art of Living Well" by Catherine Wilson. Here is what I just posted on the Goodreads website (if anyone is interested, I am

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2217-welcome-cleveland-oakie/>

"Tomj"):

"The book has weaknesses, but I really enjoyed it. The chapters on applying Epicureanism to daily life, and how to think about interpersonal relations and death, are very good. I also liked the chapter comparing Epicureanism to Stoicism. Catherine Wilson is less convincing when she insists that Epicureanism dictates her preferences on contemporary political issues, and that's what keeps me from awarding five stars. But I read this as a library book, and I now plan to buy the Kindle so I will have this in my library."

I would add for the benefit of this website that as far as anachronistically claiming Epicurus as an ally for modern political stances, Norman DeWitt seems more convincing to me in linking Epicurus to classical liberalism. It seems to me that Epicurus' advice to avoid politics and "live unnoticed" seems closer to DeWitt's political stances than Wilson urging that we all become political activists.

Still, I have been looking for a book that applies Epicureanism to day to day living and life choices, and for the most part, Wilson seems sound to me.

If anyone wants to recommend what I should read next, I will listen! I am leaning toward "On the Nature of Things."