

# Epicureanism and cult-like mentality?

**Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 7:24 AM**

I'm going to ask another question in a separate thread because the subjects substantially differ one from another.

It seems that the Epicurean society was a bit separated from the rest of the world- own classes, an own garden, own hierarchical structures, etc. In contrast to that, the Stoics were right in the centre of the social life, inviting everyone to attend these events.

Thus I get the expression that Epicureanism favours the creation of cult-like mentalities, where Epicureans claim to know „true beliefs“ (the same thing any cult leader would proclaim to know). What is your stance on that?

---

**Post by “Don” of January 8, 2022 at 8:07 AM**

If you're getting this impression from DeWitt, I'll be the first to admit I have problems with DeWitt. You'll notice some of my reviews of specific chapters of *Epicurus and His Philosophers* in this section. I have major issues with his Ranks and Titles section in chapter 5. I do not necessarily subscribe to a DeWittian interpretation in all things Epicurean.

That being said, I'd like to address a couple specifics in your post/question.

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Epicurean society was a bit separated from the rest of the world- own classes, an own garden, own hierarchical structures

There was a school, but I wouldn't call it a society. Epicurus regularly participated in the life of his city, especially in the religious festivals and rites. This comes through loud and clear in Philodemus's *On Piety*.

The Garden was also not a commune or compound. Students were free to come and go and attend classes and celebratory meals. Property was not held in common. This is explicitly stated in Diogenes Laërtius's writing.

Plus the Garden wasn't secluded or remote. It was right near one of the main gates of Athens on a highly traveled road. It just so happened that Epicurus could afford a place for his school to meet. A refuge from the city life for a time.

All the schools held "classes" and lectures. Most of not all of Aristotle's existing works were compiled by a student from lecture notes they took. I don't think we have extant.

All the schools had leaders and teachers.

All the schools thought they taught the truth.

One of the things that attracted me to explore this philosophy in the first place was because it was the *\*only\** ancient school to welcome every member of society including women and slaves. There are women who were respected members of the school and who wrote philosophical texts (none of which survive - big surprise) arguing against the leading teachers of other schools.

That's all for now, but I appreciate your starting this thread!

---

### **Post by "Matt" of January 8, 2022 at 8:28 AM**

I'm less concerned with the "cult" terminology these days because the content of Epicurus's philosophy is based on personal/individual perception of reality based on sensory experience. I'm certain you could classify Epicureans as somewhat cultic. But all that being said against the backdrop of the majority of the world historically being saturated in superstition, religion, false ideologies etc. Epicurus stands in stark contrast to other "cult" leaders, where he is trying to release society from the bondage of these ideologies. Most of those who we consider cult leaders (Sai Baba, Nithyananda, Jim Jones) are charlatans that rely on superstitious ideologies and religions. So Epicurus might be considered a cult leader to some, but given the context of his philosophy which isn't supernatural or based in some form of inaccessible secret gnostic knowledge that only the cult leader knows or has access to, he'd be the most benign in the history of cult leaders. People that venerate him (celebrate his life, his birthday etc.) recognize that in the long history of liars and frauds, Epicurus stood out as one who tried to break the chains of the religionist and supernaturalist frauds and give freedom to the individual to see the world as it is.

---

### **Post by "Matt" of January 8, 2022 at 8:45 AM**

Given what you know of Epicurus's philosophy, I'm going to post two examples of modern cult leaders, and then see the context of what the "cult" of Epicurus is against the backdrop of the others....

<https://youtu.be/zmZjdqkZI8>

<https://youtu.be/t08vtVF-ZXk>

---

### **Post by "Eikadistes" of January 8, 2022 at 11:32 AM**

It was totally a cult.

However, like the word "God", the word "cult" has been de-contextualized from its origins. As far as Epicureanism goes, it checks all of the boxes. Veneration of a figure-head who is treated with reverence? Check. Small following of a subversive ideology? Check. Sayings, rituals, and celebrations according to a personality, institution, or system? Check.

Hiding abuse beneath the guise of authority? Non-existent. Punishments for non-compliance? Absolutely not. A membership fee or pyramid-scheme structure? Negative. Requirements to cut ties with family? The opposite is true.

So, just like the counter-intuitive answer this materialist has to the question of divinity (he's a theist ... just a materialist theist, contrary to modern definitions of "theism") the answer to the question of "Is Epicureanism a Cult?" is, as I see it at the moment, a resounding "Yes". However, as a "cult", it is also the total opposite of something like Scientology.

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of January 8, 2022 at 1:05 PM**

#### [Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Thus I get the expression that Epicureanism favours the creation of cult-like mentalities, where Epicureans claim to know „true beliefs“ (the same thing any cult leader would proclaim to know). What is your stance on that?

As explored in most of the responses, it depends on one's definition of a cult. That world has lots of bad connotations that would not apply. On the other hand certainly Epicurus was the leader of a group, and the group held its leader in high esteem (without necessarily thinking him perfect) and I think there are all sorts of observations that can be made to the effect that there is nothing wrong whatsoever with that.

#### [Quote from Nate](#)

It was totally a cult.

However, like the word "God", the word "cult" has been de-contextualized from its origins.

I wouldn't use Nate's first sentence because I think he's right in the second sentence - you have to be careful to define your terms before you emphatically apply them.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

If you're getting this impression from DeWitt, I'll be the first to admit I have problems with DeWitt. You'll notice some of my reviews of specific chapters of Epicurus and His Philosophers in this section. I have major issues with his Ranks and Titles section in chapter 5. I do not necessarily subscribe to a DeWittian interpretation in all things Epicurean.

Not to take this off on a tangent on DeWitt, but I think DeWitt might occasionally go too far in some areas, but in most areas his ultimate conclusions are pretty fair. You could probably pull some sentences that support calling the Epicureans a "cult" but by the time you finish the whole book and consider the whole philosophy (which I think DeWitt does better than most) then I don't think you reach any of the negative conclusions that we use when using the word "Cult" today. And just the opposite - it would be absurd to argue that the man who more than anyone else taught that authority should be challenged, and that nothing should be accepted that cannot be grounded in the evidence of the senses, was attempting to set up an organization of mind-numbed robots and to intimidate them into unquestioning belief in following his whims (which I think is a fair meaning of the word cult as we use it today).

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of January 8, 2022 at 1:37 PM**

I am glad to see Don like my last post



Some people might read some posts and think that Don and I are on significantly different pages on some important issues, and while we do have differences of perspectives, pretty much all the time all you have to do is get us "on the line talking" and you find out that there is very little difference in our positions. I think both of us like to be cautious in how we are being perceived, so we tend to write explanatory comments on things that give the impression of more difference of opinion than really exists.

But it's good that we are doing our best to be clear and I think as long as people don't get the wrong impression, the attempts to drill down in clarity -- such as on the hypotheticals issue - are very good for the forum.

---

## Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 2:46 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

There was a school, but I wouldn't call it a society. Epicurus regularly participated in the life of his city, especially in the religious festivals and rites. This comes through loud and clear in Philodemus's *On Piety*.

The Garden was also not a commune or compound. Students were free to come and go and attend classes and celebratory meals. Property was not held in common. This is explicitly stated in Diogenes Laërtius's writing.

Plus the Garden wasn't secluded or remote. It was right near one of the main gates of Athens on a highly traveled road. It just so happened that Epicurus could afford a place for his school to meet. A refuge from the city life for a time.

That's a good point, and one I completely left out. I fear that DeWitt presented it a bit one-dimensional for my personal taste, but you're completely right.

### Quote

One of the things that attracted me to explore this philosophy in the first place was because it was the *\*only\** ancient school to welcome every member of society including women and slaves. There are women who were respected members of the school and who wrote philosophical texts (none of which survive - big surprise) arguing against the leading teachers of other schools.

Well yes, but then I might ask why Epicurus didn't liberate the slaves during his lifetime. And yes, I heard the theory that slaves were regarded just as we see money today- as a necessity for a running economy; nevertheless, it still raises question marks in my head.

Quote

That's all for now, but I appreciate your starting this thread!

Glad to hear 😊

---

### **Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 2:49 PM**

Quote

Given what you know of Epicurus's philosophy, I'm going to post two examples of modern cult leaders, and then see the context of what the “cult” of Epicurus is against the backdrop of the others....

Heavy stuff, I must admit. But the outside world would see Epicureanism as exactly such a kind of a cult, preaching strange things- like that happiness is found in the (oh the first glance often sinister) pleasure.

---

### **Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 2:52 PM**

Quote

And just the opposite - it would be absurd to argue that the man who more than anyone else taught that authority should be challenged, and that nothing should be accepted that cannot be grounded in the evidence of the senses, was attempting to set up an organization of mind-numbed robots and to intimidate them into unquestioning belief in following his whims (which I think is a fair meaning of the word cult as we use it today).

[Cassius](#), you're completely right, and that's why I was so confused about this- DeWitt describes Epicurus as a rebel, and a person who won't accept certain dogmas just because society says

so. And thus it didn't really made sense to me why Epicurus seemed to try and to separate his students from the outside world (which still seems to me like he was at least attempting to do).

---

### **Post by “Matt” of January 8, 2022 at 2:55 PM**

And that's where our need to expose this philosophy to the world comes into play. Supernaturalism brought the majority of the world into superstition and pain but the cult of Epicurus, which day by day is more and more validated by scientific and sociological evidence, brings us out of that pain.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 3:32 PM**

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

And thus it didn't really made sense to me why Epicurus seemed to try and to separate his students from the outside world

Did DeWitt say he did that, or did you pick that up as an artifact of what is generally "out there" on Epicurus? Either way, I don't think he "tried to separate his students from the outside world" at all. I think he taught them to embrace what was good in the world, and fight against what is bad, but in no way did he teach them to pull back into their caves. THAT is the modern or neostoic view that i think is just hogwash -- and says much more about those who say it, than it does about Epicurus, who can't be shown to have said it when the philosophy is viewed in total.

---

### **Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 3:35 PM**

Nope, DeWitt didnt state it clearly, but I got the impression.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 4:44 PM**

This will be an example, in fairness to DeWitt, that there are other contemporary writers who will give you that impression of isolationism in much stronger and unfair terms than does DeWitt.

If I recall correctly, Martha Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire* is terrible in that regard (and in other regards as well).

---

### **Post by “Joshua” of January 8, 2022 at 7:33 PM**

#### Quote

In contrast to that, the Stoics were right in the centre of the social life, inviting everyone to attend these events.

That's easily done, when one is celebrating virtue and proclaiming their attainment of it; when the civil authorities are on your side; when the prevailing culture has been pre-conditioned to accept what you're saying.

By the time Epicurus had emerged in Athens with his garden, he had already been driven out of Mytilene---a city that was once the crown jewel of Greek thought---and had settled for a time in Lampsacus.

By the time he got to Athens he had learned a few hard truths. There could be no question of teaching in the Gymnasia or the Agora, he had learned that by experience. Athens was a city of philosophers, true enough; but it was the city that condemned Socrates to death.

So he opted for an alternative. He would discourse in the relative privacy of the Garden, not in the city square. But how to reach people outside the garden?

He wrote. He wrote scroll after scroll, laying down thoughts so subversive that even his opponents would circulate them.

Diogenes Laertius calls him the most prolific writer of his age. He was, as DeWitt calls him, a pamphleteer; and three hundred years later men were still burning his books. It would not have been safe for him or for his students, to teach in public.

---

### **Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 9, 2022 at 5:44 AM**

## Quote

t would not have been safe for him or for his students, to teach in public.

That's a very good point- but was it safe for him to teach it in private? Wouldn't it even be the wisest, from a point of pleasure, to withdraw completely and to stop teaching anyone, because the pleasure you gain from teaching doesn't justify the pain of having fear to be wounded and hated?

(although I also must admit that it's our point of view, and if it would've been truly that difficult, then Epicurus wouldn't have reached- it was probably his decision and his individual valuation of pain/pleasure)

---

## Post by “Cassius” of January 9, 2022 at 6:16 AM

### [Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

- it was probably his decision and his individual valuation of pain/pleasure)

Right. I think that's the answer right there.

### [Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

, because the pleasure you gain from teaching doesn't justify the pain of having fear to be wounded and hated

And there's the problem that caused the question - likely some pains so clearly outweigh the pleasures involved that we can be confident in predicting what most everyone would choose, but we generally need to go slow in making that judgement for other people because circumstances can be very complex or just unknown to us, and how people calculate their pleasures and pains varies widely.