

Draft Your Own Personal Outline of Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of January 16, 2018 at 7:57 PM

2024 Update

We have had many good discussions stemming from this suggestion to draw personal outlines, but here is one point of clarification: There are two goals of significance - (1) to improve your understanding of your own ideas, and (2) to improve your understanding of Epicurean philosophy. In other words, just as Thomas Jefferson did, you should be able to list out the ideas of Epicurus in a form that shows that you understand them. However that doesn't mean that your list constitutes your personal manifesto of life any more than Jefferson's meant that Jefferson himself always followed every statement in the list. Therefore as you consider adding your outline here, be sure to consider that the first goal out to be to be able to state accurately what Epicurus held before you yourself can decide whether you agree or disagree with him.

Outlines are important in learning Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus advised in the letter to Herodotus that everyone should be able to reduce the major principles of the philosophy to a simplified outline of the main points. Epicurus wrote:

"Those who have made some advance in the survey of the entire system ought to fix in their minds under the principal headings an elementary outline of the whole treatment of the subject. For a comprehensive view is often required, the details but seldom. To the former, then—the main heads—we must continually return, and must memorize them so far as to get a valid conception of the facts, as well as the means of discovering all the details exactly when once the general outlines are rightly understood and remembered. It is the privilege of the mature student to make a ready use of his conceptions by referring every one of them to elementary facts and simple terms. For it is impossible to gather up the results of continuous diligent study of the entirety of things unless we can embrace in short formulas and hold in mind all that might have been accurately expressed even to the minutest detail."

We know that Thomas Jefferson followed this advice because we have the outline he himself included in his [letter to William Short in 1819](#). Here it is in Jefferson's own handwriting ([link to full text of letter](#)) -

[Selection_067-300x243.jpg](#)

Outlines, however, must be applied to particular circumstances in order to be useful. We have an interesting example of this in Jefferson's letter to William Short. Jefferson provided to Short his summary of Epicurean philosophy in general principles, but Jefferson also pointed a particular error that Short was committing: Even though Short considered himself to be an Epicurean, Short was misinterpreting the philosophy by thinking that Epicurus advised rest and repose as the goal of living. Jefferson corrected this error - an error still widely committed and spread by commentators today - by advising **action** to pursue pleasure, rather than **repose**:

"I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided." Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road. Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up."

Notice how Jefferson in the same letter described "in-dolence" as "the greatest felicity," while at the same time rebuking Short for pursuing indolence! This is an example of how Epicurean terminology cannot be considered superficially, and must be considered closely if it is to be applied correctly.

We each therefore need to learn to understand Epicurus thoroughly so that we do not misapply his advice. As an aid in following this path, this special forum group has been set up at EpicureanFriends.com, where you are invited to post your own personal outline as you study Epicurus. As you post, you can then receive comments and suggestions from others that will give you ideas and advice about how you can improve your personal outline.

The first step in applying Epicurean philosophy is to understand Epicurean philosophy, so you should first start with an outline of your understanding of Epicurus' views.

Next you can consider your own personal application. Although Epicurean philosophy has general principles that apply to everyone, Epicurus also emphasized the reality of the individual context in which we must apply the general principles. A good way to proceed in applying Epicurean principles is to outline your own application. Each person has their own context of concerns and spheres of action in which to consider how to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. The details of each individual outline will therefore vary according to those circumstances. Your detailed personal outline will eventually be too private to post, but general outlines can be included here for public discussion.

Here is an example of the variety you can expect:

Some people are already sufficiently confirmed in their own understanding of the nature of the universe that it is appropriate for them to stop (at least at first) with a broad conclusion, such as:

"Nature: The universe operates on Natural principles, and is not influenced by supernatural forces."

Others, however, will want to outline the study of the universe (physics) in much more detail so that they can understand, and hold with confidence, the reasons why this conclusion (the universe operates on natural / non-supernatural principles) is true.

Most, in all likelihood, are somewhere in between, and they need to outline the fundamentals of how nothing exists except matter and void, that nothing is ever created from or destroyed to nothing, and similar observations that underlay the fundamental conclusion that the universe is natural.

Here are a few suggestions for posting your first outline:

1. Keep it simple. Don't try to cover every aspect of Epicurean philosophy in the first outline. Make sure to cover the main points first.
2. Although you want to keep the outline simple, you also want to cover the three major branches of Epicurean philosophy: (1) The nature of the universe, (2) The nature of knowledge, and (3) The nature of how to live.
3. Don't delete your first outline post, but copy it over into new posts and make the changes there. That way you can follow the progression of your thoughts as you refine your understanding.

The best thing to do is go ahead and post your outline even if you think it is incomplete. A major benefit of this exercise is thinking through the process, and others can make suggestions for additions or changes as you go through the drafting process. You will no doubt find yourself redrafting over and over as you apply the general rules to your particular situation.

Remember: copying someone else's outline and adopting it as yours does nothing to advance your understanding of Epicurean philosophy or how it should be applied in your life. You may think that someone else has already developed the ultimate Epicurean outline, and think that it is sufficient to adopt it for yourself. A full understanding requires that you can state the principles yourself and explain why each of them is true and important.

Here's a good example of the pitfall of copying without understanding:

One of the most well-known outlines of Epicurean philosophy is the "Tetrapharmakon": (1) Don't fear God, (2) Don't fear death, (3) What's good is easy to get, and (4) What's bad is easy to avoid.

This is a very easy to remember and concise statement of certain aspects of the first four [principal doctrines](#). However if you do not understand the reasoning behind it, you can easily become discouraged, dismayed, and completely turned off from Epicurean philosophy. Many people reading the Tetrapharmakon immediately think to themselves: "Why *shouldn't* I fear god? Why shouldn't I fear death? I don't find that what is good is easy to get and I certainly don't find that what is bad is easy to avoid!" These people dismiss Epicurus as just another ivory-tower academic, and they miss his true insights completely.

Only someone who is familiar enough with Epicurean philosophy to understand the reasoning behind the Tetrapharmakon can use it appropriately. It takes study to understand Epicurus' reasoning that gods are not to be feared because such "divinity" as may exist is perfect and does not interfere with mortals. It takes study to understand Epicurus' reasoning that death is not to be feared because there is no consciousness after death. It takes study to understand the reasoning behind "the good" being easy to get, "the bad" being easy to avoid" and why the issue of "limits" is relevant to the question at all.

Absent study into the reasoning of Epicurus, a too-brief summary can seem trite and off-putting. It is therefore necessary for each student to build up - step by step - their own understanding of Epicurean philosophy. Only then can they construct in their own context an appropriate outline that reflects their own understanding and assists them in applying Epicurean principles to their own lives.

This is a new project and we will be working out many kinks as we go along. However the process of working together with other student of Epicurean philosophy to produce an outline most suitable for yourself should be a beneficial process to everyone involved. Get started as soon as you can at [www. Epicurean friends.com](http://www.EpicureanFriends.com).

TO GET STARTED: In the list of forums you see above at the top of this page ([Epicureanfriends.com / Forum / General Discussion & News / Personal Outlines of Epicurean Philosophy](#)) and select a topic to read the explanations / or

**DON'T FALL SHORT -
DRAFT YOUR OWN
PERSONAL OUTLINE OF
EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY**

1: The Nature of the Universe
A - -----
B - -----

2: The Nature of Knowledge
A - -----
B - -----

3: The Nature of Living Well
A - -----
B - -----

www.NewEpicurean.com/personaloutline

Post by “brett” of January 16, 2018 at 10:39 PM

Love this idea. I will post mine in the next few days!

Brett

Post by “Cassius” of January 16, 2018 at 11:09 PM

Thank you Brett! I very much appreciate it as that will help get the ball rolling! When you do, please start a new thread in this forum, as that is the pattern I think will work best - If everyone has their own thread. If you run into any difficulties doing it, please let me know. I think the post editor even allows outlines - using the LIST command at top right of the menu bar.

Just as a test here's an example of using the editor here. Seems to work well! I am thinking that the thing for people to do is start their own thread, then compose their own version of something like this - starting basic and then expanding. A format like this (starting basic, like Jefferson's) will be especially helpful for people who focus only on the ethics, and really haven't thought about how the physics and the epistemology relate to the whole:

1. Nature / Physics
 1. Nothing but matter and void
 2. Nothing comes to nothing or goes to nothing
 2. Knowledge / Truth
 1. The senses are reliable witnesses
 3. Ethics / How to live
 1. Pleasure is the goal of life
 2. The Virtues are tools for the achievement of pleasure
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Post by “Cassius” of January 27, 2018 at 6:33 AM

People reading this thread and thinking about their own outline might also find [this chart](#) helpful.

Post by "Cassius" of December 15, 2018 at 5:17 PM

And I have recently put together this new one, [which I added to the FAQ](#). The latest version will stay at the FAQ, but as of 12/15/18 as I write this, the version is below. But don't just copy this, use it for what it is worth, but nothing will sink in until you write your own.

1. The Universe Operates on Natural Principles And There Are No Supernatural Gods

1. Gods Are Never Observed to Create Something From Nothing Or Destroy Anything to Nothing
2. The Universe Operates Through Natural Processes Based On Combinations Of Matter And Void
3. The Universe As A Whole Is Eternal And Was Never Created From Nothing
4. The Universe Is Infinite In Size And There Are No "Gods" Outside Of it
5. True Gods Would Be Self-Sufficient And Would Not Meddle In the Affairs Of Men

2. There Is No Life After Death

1. All Things In The Universe Which Come Together Eventually Break Apart
2. The Soul Is Born With The Body And Cannot Survive Without It
3. Death Is The End of All Sensation, And There Is No Consciousness Without Sensation
4. There Is After Death No Heaven or Hell For Reward or Punishment
5. Life Is Short And Therefore Our Time Is Too Precious To Waste

3. The Standards of Truth Are the Senses, The Anticipations, and the Feelings, Assisted By Reason

1. He Who Argues That Nothing Can Be Known Contradicts His Own Argument
2. Reasoning Is Based On The Senses And Is Not Valid Without Them
3. The Sensations Are Without Reason, Incapable of Memory, And Do Not Inject Error Through Opinion
4. The Reality Of Separate Sensations Is the Guarantee of The Truth Of Our Senses
5. Not Only Reason, But Life Itself, Fails Unless We Have the Courage To Trust The Senses

4. The Guide of Life is Pleasure

1. Pleasure, Along With Pain, Is A Feeling, One Of The Three Standards Of Truth
2. Pleasure and Pain Include All Types of Physical And Mental Experiences
3. The Mental Pleasures And Pains Are Frequently More Intense Than The Physical
4. Feelings Of Pleasure Are Desirable And Serve As The Guide of Life
5. Pain Is To Be Avoided But Is Accepted For The Sake of Greater Pleasure Or Lesser Pain

5. The Goal of Life Is Happiness

1. Happiness Is a Life In Which Pleasure Predominates Over Pain

2. If We Have Happiness We Have All We Need; If We Lack Happiness We Do Everything To Gain It
 3. There Is No Absolute Virtue, Piety, Reason, Or Justice To Serve As the Goal of Life
 4. Virtue, Piety, Reason and Justice Are Valuable Only Insofar As They Bring Happiness
 5. All Actions Are To Be Judged According To Whether They Bring Happiness
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Post by “melkor” of March 26, 2020 at 10:46 PM

This is a very interesting project - I feel like I could add on more and more for a while but here are the more broad overviews of my personal Epicurean philosophy

1. The God(s) do not exist but if they did, they do not interfere with human affairs and thus we don't have to worry about them at all. I do not personally believe that humans were created by any supernatural forces or designers, we are in fact products of nature, experiments over billions of years of development and evolutions as Lucretius correctly pointed out. We are fundamentally made up of matter, and matter fills the universe in the void. The entire universe from how I see it is essentially made up of matter and energy (two sides of the same coin according to Relativity) and the laws of physics dictate the movement and arrangements of matter. It may create stars, planets, asteroids, and much more, including human beings. We are simply a configuration of matter as dictated by the laws of physics and chemistry. Whether the universe or matter has a beginning is still a mystery, but we know the universe evolves from different states, as the Big Bang Theory predicts, the universe was at one point very condensed and hot but has become wide and cold.

On a more atomic level, we see that in quantum mechanics the movements of some subatomic particles appear to move and behave indeterministically, and there are several interpretations of quantum mechanics that result in an indeterministic universe and it is currently not known how this affects the nature of free will. I choose to believe in free will personally but I will leave the physicists to their work.

2. There is no life after death. I do not believe in souls because there is no evidence or reason to believe in it. If something were to exist that is impenetrable to decomposition in the human body, it would be unable to sense or reason, since the nerve endings left behind in the body responsible for sensation are decomposing away, as well as the brain - which is responsible for reasoning, and therefor even if souls did exist and go someplace else, it would never be able to feel, nor reason, therefor there is not life after death we can experience. It is the same experience as before our birth, and I hear not the cries of pain from the before born, therefor, there is no pain before or after existence.

3. The senses are a reliable way of telling truth, and indeed many times the mind misinterprets them to have wrong conclusions. The trick is to train the mind using tools like mathematics and logic to have correct conclusions about existence and specifically how to live a pleasurable life. This is what makes science reliable, as well as mathematics.

4. The purpose of existence is to achieve pleasure. Life on Earth exists to achieve positive stimuli or get rid of negative stimuli both in a sensual way and psychological. Non-human animals even try to achieve as pleasurable an existence as they can. This is because pleasure correlates with survival instincts of our evolutionary past - humans needed relationships and connections to survive, and thus it is healthy to make friends, as well as eat food, drink water, and even sexual intercourse is pleasurable because of survival of our genes. I mean, for species that did not find sex to be pleasurable, they likely died out due to not reproducing, hence most species enjoy having sex because it's pleasurable. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with achieving pleasure based on natural and necessary needs, and it is ultimately up to the individual to determine what is pleasurable to them and to rationally plan on how to pursue that pleasure, even if it involves a little pain along the way.

5. I choose to believe that pleasure is ethically good and pain is ethically bad. However, I am not a moral objectivist in the strictest sense. I do not believe there is a basis for objective morality and believe that our morals are more feelings driven than anything else, since we tend to associate with ideas and beliefs that make us feel good to support or fight against, and form logic and reason as an afterthought to justify it. The 20th century philosophers have laid waste to moral objectivism, in part because I do believe that nature is indifferent to our moral systems, it simply wants to ensure its own survival (and since we are a part of nature, we want to survive), but this gives us as humans with the ability to reason to choose our own path to pursue what is pleasurable to us.

Post by "Cassius" of March 27, 2020 at 6:10 AM

Thanks for adding that Melkor. It certainly seems to me from what you've written that you're covering the major bases of Epicurus. If there is one that is a little abbreviated it is number three, and I am thinking that this sentence might be worth qualifying and/or making more precise: "The trick is to train the mind using tools like mathematics and logic to have correct conclusions about existence and specifically how to live a pleasurable life."

But in general it looks like you're going to have a lot of good things to contribute even beyond Tolkeinian linguistics! 😊

Post by “melkor” of March 27, 2020 at 9:05 AM

Thank you! Yes sometimes I write very fast and I struggle to properly complete the sentence in my mind before it is written through my fingers and onto the screen. To (hopefully) clarify, I believe that the senses are reliable sources of information, and when they appear wrong it is because we are misinterpreting them through reason. Therefore, we must learn to interpret the senses correctly if we are to distinguish between what is real and what is an illusion. It is reasoning that allows us also to think more precisely about existence and philosophy, and also what allows us to develop mathematics and logic - tools for understanding reality. But the ultimate purpose for reason and tools of reason like mathematics is to live a pleasurable life. If that makes sense!

Post by “Cassius” of March 27, 2020 at 9:19 AM

Yes I think that makes perfect sense. I think the issue of "logic" and what Lucretius meant by "true reason" and all those related issues as to dialectical logic and so forth are difficult for many people to accept at first, and in fact they are difficult issues to express even for people who are familiar with the issue, so I was just checking! 😊

I think DeWitt's chapter on the canon, with his emphasis that "reason" is not a part of the canon, is really helpful in setting the course to understand that Epicurus did not view "reason" or "logic" as direct connections with reality outside our minds.

Anyway, very good!

Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2021 at 7:30 AM

[This may be repetitive and should be deleted - just parking it here temporarily] Here is the advice of Thomas Jefferson on living an active Epicurean life:

"I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided." Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a

relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road. Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up." - Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819.

Understanding

FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF
THOMAS JEFFERSON
AND DRAFT YOUR OWN
PERSONAL OUTLINE OF
EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY

1: The Nature of the Universe
A - -----
B - -----
2: The Nature of Knowledge
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Here's How: www.NewEpicurean.com/personaloutline

Epicurus' Letter to Herodotus: *"Those who have made some advance in the survey of the entire system ought to fix in their minds under the principal headings an elementary outline of the whole treatment of the subject. For a comprehensive view is often required, the details but seldom. ... For it is impossible to gather up the results of continuous diligent study of the entirety of things unless we can embrace in short formulas and hold in mind all that might have been accurately expressed even to the minutest detail."*

Thomas Jefferson wrote in a private letter "I too am an Epicurean" and drafted his own outline of Epicurean philosophy. If you'd like to see what Jefferson wrote, and get help in drafting your own, click here.

Post by "Scott" of March 25, 2022 at 11:41 PM

An attempt anyway, at:

"My Epicureanism"

-it may be a bit "off"

I. Physics

or

How I "live" between quotation marks

so glad there comes the chance

to be a *wave* in this amazing Ocean of EVERYTHING!

"i" am always Home

always have been

always will be

breathing, the Ocean and "i" share, right now

not breathing, we still share (everything!)

so

Hallelujah!!!

how exciting!

the Ocean needs "me"!

to say that:

...Hallelujah!!!

all day

II. Epistemology:

or

How the heck am "i" supposita no?

"i" can always learn more

Hallelujah is NOT just
an eXclaim!
is a challenge
to make meaning(s)
tug it outta worm dirt-
and lexicons!
work! work work!

III. Ethics:

or

Whats for dinner?

ok

may there be happiness, joy and fun

may suffering fade

may worry be put aside

may there be kindness

may there be good friends

may there be laughter

may there be rejoicing in the well being of others

(slow down, will ya? there's only a little left)

may there be great compassion

may there be wisdom

may there be gratitude, in all directions

none but one of these are allowed

to be small

hall-le-LOOOOOOOooooooJAH!!!!

(aka "hell YES")

all day

all days

rinse, repeat

until smiling. with no breathing

"i" always like Ethics best 😊