

How has the word epicurean come to mean excess?

Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 13, 2023 at 9:24 AM

Good afternoon everyone

As I've been learning about Epicurus and how he taught a simple life of modest pleasures, I'd really like to know how being Epicurean got to be twisted on its head i.e being a person who is into fine and luxurious foods.

I've been researching via google to try and learn how the meaning was basically butchered to mean something totally different but I can't find much info.

How on earth did 'being epicurean' come to mean something that Epicurus would have wanted to avoid?

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 13, 2023 at 9:29 AM

Christianity.

Post by “Don” of May 13, 2023 at 9:40 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Christianity.

It goes back further than that. Dr. Gordon's book documents the idea back to or shortly after Epicurus's own lifetime

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 13, 2023 at 9:41 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Christianity.

To be fair, Hedonists (albeit *Cyrenaics*, or *Epicureans*, or *others*) have **always** been accused of excess by their philosophical and religious opponents. One of the first criticisms we find of Epicurus comes from Timocrates, the brother of Metrodorus, who accused Epicurus of being a glutton and a pervert.

Even then, Stoics like Seneca, and critics like Cicero, still demonstrate genuine admiration for Epicurus, and recognize that most of his philosophical positions were dignified and respectable.

With the (possible) sole exception of Gassendi and his followers in the Renaissance, Christian clergy, scholars, and theologians have operated on the principle that Epicureanism is at least misguided and at most **pure evil**. St. Augustine lambasts Epicureanism. Dante degrades Epicureans in his *Divine Comedy*. Pamela Gordon's excellent book *The Invention and Gendering of Epicurus* shows how, for **millennia**, opponents of Epicureanism (primarily Christians) bastardized his name with slurs (primarily accusing him of being effeminate because Christian culture has been so hostile to femininity). The examples are extensive.

But, to reiterate: **Christianity** is the biggest reason.

(You can read Gordon's book for free at this publicly-hosted location that in no way, shape, or form implicates EpicureanFriends as infringers of copyright: <https://librosycultura2.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/gordon...of-epicurus.pdf>)

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 13, 2023 at 9:45 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

[Quote from Nate](#)

But, to reiterate: **Christianity** is the biggest reason.

Actually, I take that back.

The biggest culprit in the modern era (*because your average American can't be expected to employ historical terminology like "Epicureanism"*) are restaurateurs, who have changed the definition to mean "**foodie**".

I think at this point it's not a matter of criticism as much as a complete re-definition of the word.

Post by "Cassius" of May 13, 2023 at 10:20 AM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

I'd really like to know how being Epicurean got to be twisted on its head i.e being a person who is into fine and luxurious foods.

Most of the comment so far focus on the intentional warping.

There is also the fact that there is a "grain of truth" in that if you are thinking that Epicurus was "only" into simple pleasures, then that too is not true.

Epicurus was into "pleasure" and that can come in many ways, simple and luxurious, and the trick is to manoeuvre through your personal context to focus on pleasures that do not cause you more pain than you are willing to experience for the sake of those pleasures.

The standard translation of [VS63](#) is: [VS63](#). Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess.

Further in the letter to Menoecus:

130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good. And again independence of desire we think a great good — not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it, and that all that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard. And so plain savours bring us a pleasure equal to a luxurious diet, when all the pain due to want is removed; and bread and water produce the highest pleasure, when one who needs them puts them to his lips.

So there is both the "intentional misrepresentation" and the "grain of truth" that can be seen when you dive into the specific meaning of the words involved.

Welcome to the forum! This and many other similar questions are very deep so we always like to discuss them.

Post by “Don” of May 13, 2023 at 5:28 PM

Here's the entry from the Oxford English Dictionary with its historical citations:

Noun

A person devoted to sensual pleasure, esp. to eating and drinking; a hedonist; a glutton. In later use also: a person who cultivates a refined taste for, or takes a particular pleasure in, fine food and drink; an epicure. In early use chiefly depreciative.

a1450 (▶c1435) J. Lydgate *Life SS. Edmund & Fremund* (Harl.) l. 225 in C. Horstmann *Altengl. Legenden* (1881) 2nd Ser. 381 (MED) Fals lust..of epicuriens.

a1475 (▶?a1430) J. Lydgate tr. G. Deguileville *Pilgrimage Life Man* (Vitell.) l. 12786 'I wolde se What Epicuriens sholde be.'..'That perfytt ffelycyte Ys, that a man lyk hys delyt, ffolwe alway hys appetyt.'

a1572 J. Knox *Hist. Reformation Scotl.* (1587) 188 Simon Preston..a right Epicurian.

a1652 J. Smith *Select Disc.* (1660) i. iii. 21 Those poor brutish Epicureans that have nothing but the meer husks of fleshly pleasure to feed themselves with.

1728 S. Whatley tr. J. Lenfant *Hist. Council of Constance* l. 577 Jerome was such an Epicurean in his Prison, that he spent his whole Time in Drunkenness and Gluttony.

1825 W. Scott *Talisman x, in Tales Crusaders* III. 250 He was a voluptuary and an epicurean.

1855 J. L. Motley *Rise Dutch Republic* l. ii. i. 256 A horde of lazy epicureans, telling beads and indulging themselves in luxurious vice.

1935 *Washington Post* 16 Oct. 5 There are a few real epicureans of the table.

2008 *National Jeweler* 1 Oct. 18 It [sc. chocolate] has become a bonbon for adults, to be savored by epicureans.

Adjective:

Originally: devoted to the pursuit of pleasure; (hence) hedonistic, gluttonous. Now chiefly: designating a person who takes a particular pleasure in fine food and drink; characteristic of, or suitable for, such a person; gourmet. Cf. epicure n. 2.

1583 W. Chauncie tr. P. Viret *Worlde Possessed with Devils* ii. sig. F.vi Their Epicurian life [Fr. leur vie Epicurienne], giuen ouer to al filthinesse and enormitie.

1612 C. Demetrius tr. *Most True Relation Earth-quake* sig. B2v All at their plenteous and Epicurean voluptuous tables, fall to drinking, swilling, and carowsing deepe healths.

a1616 W. Shakespeare *Antony & Cleopatra* (1623) ii. i. 24 Epicurean Cookes, Sharpen with cloylesse sawce his Appetite.

1641 J. Milton *Of Reformation* 84 Warming their Palace Kitchens, and from thence their unctuous, and epicurean paunches.

1656 A. Cowley Misc. 37 in *Poems Voluptuous, and Wise with all, Epicuraean Animal!*

1750 *Student* 1 No. 6. 214 I'll be temperate, and stoutly withstand all the allurements of delicious fare, and the seducements of epicurean companions.

1765 *Parasite* II. xvii. 204 He dined at the Twopence Halfpenny Ordinary in Newgate Street (which we cannot suppose to have been a very Epicurean Meal).

1826 *Monitor* (Sydney) 15 Dec. 245/3 He who has fed upon corn for six-months, can eat a 'fat cake', with a true epicurean relish.

1850 T. Carlyle *Latter-day Pamphlets* vi. 15 No longer an earnest Nation, but a light, sceptical epicurean one.

1856 H. Penciller *Rural Life in Amer.* viii. 222 An epicurean fare we lived on, too.

1934 G. Ross *Tips on Tables* 37 An entree to delight any epicurean soul.

1954 *Life* 1 Feb. 44/2 Fancy preparing an epicurean feast so fast!

2008 *IPA Rev.* (Austral.) July 11/2 Slow food is not just an epicurean delight—it is a political and ideological movement.

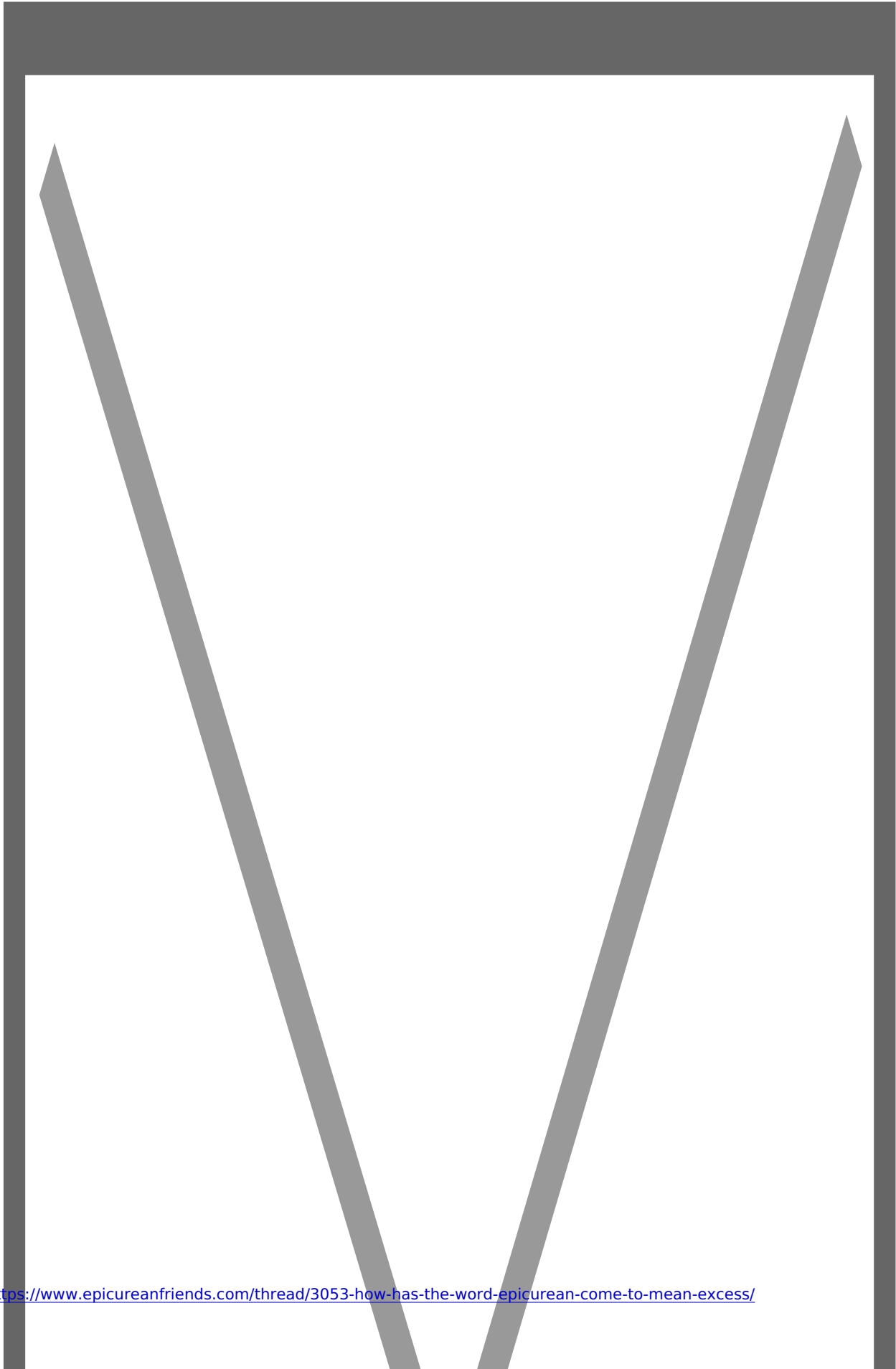
Post by “Don” of May 13, 2023 at 6:23 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

To be fair, Hedonists (albeit Cyrenaics, or Epicureans, or others) have always been accused of excess by their philosophical and religious opponents.

And it appears it wasn't even just philosophical opponents. It appears that the "Epicurean" as cook or gourmand was even a familiar trope in New Comedy. There are "contemporary or near-contemporary [to the life of Epicurus] depictions of Epicureans, considering at length the buffoonish chef, a stock character in the New Comedy often depicted as an Epicurean to lambaste sensual pleasure and lack of self-control." [Source](#)

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Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 14, 2023 at 3:21 PM

This is really interesting, I love the fact that there are active thinkers on this forum. So from reading your posts, it sounds like Christianity had a big impact on dissolving Epicurean philosophy. I don't know anything about this so I will go away and do some research but if anyone has anything to say on this, I'd be really interested.

I do know that Epicureans believed in gods who had put things in motion but then removed themselves from our affairs and sat completely detached from humans - in this way they were almost atheist (please correct me if I am wrong on any of this) and didn't believe in an afterlife so this belief system would definitely contradict Christianity where beliefs are about a personal God, as well as the whole heaven and hell thing and Jesus saying there is only one way to be saved.

Post by “Cassius” of May 14, 2023 at 4:33 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

I do know that Epicureans believed in gods who had put things in motion but then removed themselves from our affairs and sat completely detached from humans

I am sure others will chime in but if by "things" you mean the entire universe, then this is not correct -- that is the "deist" view but not the Epicurean view. In the Epicurean view the universe is eternal and was never created by any gods or other supernatural forces. In whole and in total (not particular planets or solar systems or galaxies, but truly 'in whole') the universe has always existed and always will exist. That is why the phrases "nothing from nothing" and "nothing to nothing" are so foundational.

As far as the rest of your paragraph yes that would be correct. There is absolutely no "supernatural" dimension -- no heaven, no hell, no afterlife of any kind.

Post by "Cassius" of May 14, 2023 at 4:39 PM

Thanks for that question and that helps let us know where you are in your reading.

We have some initial introductory material on pages like this -- <https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/new-user-page/>

- but we really need better summaries of the core material.

All of the books and material we have listed in your "Welcome" message are good, and where you start depends mainly on your particular interests. The videos and other intro material on Youtube and elsewhere generally focus on the "ethics" questions and they can leave people bewildered if they don't understand some of the basic worldview issues first.

It would be of great help to us if you would give us feedback on what you find to be clear and what you find to be confusing as you read further into Epicurus. We use information like that to make the website better and to decide what kind of new materials to produce.

Post by "Pacatus" of May 15, 2023 at 2:09 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurus was into "pleasure" and that can come in many ways, simple and luxurious, and the trick is to manoeuvre through your personal context to focus on pleasures that do not cause you more pain than you are willing to experience for the sake of those pleasures.



Post by "ThinkingCat" of May 19, 2023 at 1:45 PM

ok great, so I promise I will go away and do some reading but could anyone briefly summarise why Christianity was a problem for Epicurus - obviously Christian's believed in a personal god but how would Christianity have helped portray Epicureanism as excess?

Post by "ThinkingCat" of May 19, 2023 at 1:46 PM

[Cassius](#) - thanks for the link above, I am hopefully going to check it out over the weekend ☐☐

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2023 at 1:59 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

ok great, so I promise I will go away and do some reading but could anyone briefly summarize.....

We are glad to do that in virtually every case so don't worry that you are be asked to go away and read the manual 😊

Post by "Don" of May 19, 2023 at 2:08 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

ok great, so I promise I will go away and do some reading but could anyone briefly summarise why Christianity was a problem for Epicurus - obviously Christian's believed in a personal god but how would Christianity have helped portray Epicureanism as excess?

Christians did not like (to put it mildly) that Epicureans did not believe in an immortal soul that could be punished or rewarded in an afterlife. The Christians also didn't like that Epicureans did not believe "god" intervened in the world and human affairs. There were a number of "disagreements" but those are the main ones.

Epicureans are actually mentioned in the Bible at Acts 17:18.

Post by "Don" of May 19, 2023 at 3:11 PM

FYI... Acts 17:18-34 (NRSV)

The word "babbling" is actually σπερμολόγος (spermalogos) "idle babbling, gossiping"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, σπερμολόγος](#)

Quote

18Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) 19So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." 21Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26From one ancestor[i] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27so that they would search for God[j] and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we too are his offspring.'

29Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

32When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33At that point Paul left them. 34But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 19, 2023 at 3:42 PM

I see, thanks for these excerpts. I can see why Christianity and Epicurians wouldn't get along but I still don't see how Christian's would be responsible for portraying Epicurus as someone into excess? Also didn't Epicurus only eat water and bread and sometimes a little cheese? That must have been documented somewhere that Christian's would have been able to read, if we know this today.

A serious question here - if that was all Epicurus ate, wasn't he very unhealthy? I have read around this and it seems you can live on this for a while but ultimately you would become sick due to nutritional deficiencies (pretty obvious). Did he choose to only eat these foods? Did he have no choice? Surely he wouldn't have recommended that diet to anyone? (Ultimately it would cause pain)

[Cassius](#) - thanks for the reference to the thread that says Thankyou For Visiting Epicurean Friends. A really good starting point for me. I'd be interested in reading Norman DeWitt's book. I had a look at the library but it's not available, even for order. I had a look online and on Amazon it's £52! I am guessing it is not often in print or something? I did find this book at my library though - Travels with Epicurus - Daniel M Klein. Do you or anyone else know anything about this book?

Post by “Don” of May 19, 2023 at 3:46 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

Also didn't Epicurus only eat water and bread and sometimes a little cheese?

That's a common misconception. Here's my commentary on that in my letter to Menoikeus translation:

Quote

These are two important words: μᾶζα, ὕδωρ. A number of commentators point to these two words to insist that Epicurus and all those who lived or studied in the Garden ate only “bread and water.” I have always been curious about which kind of bread was being referred to. It turns out its μᾶζα (maza) which was an ancient Greek barley-cake

or a thick barley porridge as opposed to ἄρτος (artos), a cake or loaf of wheat bread. Maza could be a quick, hearty, simple meal all by itself. Pass the Flamingo (a website on ancient recipes and food) has an interesting article on it which includes a recipe.

It's important to point back to verse 126c at this point. The idea of eating "only" bread and water seems Spartan (pun intended) and ascetic to us, but bread and water (or, probably more commonly, wine) *was* a meal in ancient Greece. A simple meal of maza with a cup of water, without all the extra dishes that made up ὄψον, would not have been an uncommon meal. Epicurus isn't advocating an ascetic lifestyle here. He's pointing to the simple, everyday meals that many Athenians took for granted. You don't need an extravagant, ten-course feast to experience pleasure. Slow down, appreciate what's in front of you, take delight in the everyday pleasures - like that meal you don't give a second thought to. But Epicurus will have more to say about this soon.

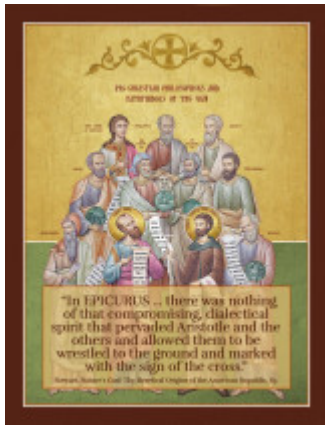
Post by "ThinkingCat" of May 19, 2023 at 3:53 PM

[Don](#) very interesting! Thanks for that, puts a happier perspective on things, that hopefully Epicurus was getting a few more vitamins and minerals!

Post by "Eikadistes" of May 19, 2023 at 6:25 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

could anyone briefly summarise why Christianity was a problem for Epicurus



Early Christians could not reconcile the two traditions, and Roman Epicureanism was an ideological competitor to Christian evangelism. **"Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this pretentious babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)"** (Acts 17:18 NRSVUE). Whereas elements of Stoicism were incorporated into Christian theology (*Providence*, a *Universal God*, etc.), Epicureanism is antithetical to Christianity.

Post by "Eikadistes" of May 19, 2023 at 6:35 PM

The image I shared above *Pre-Christian Philosophers and Pathfinders of the Way* is a contemporary work based on the frescos at the Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi on Mount Athos in the style of Orthodox iconography. The Christian artist depicts Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Homer, and others right alongside St. Paul and Justin Martyr. Many Christian theologians (such as Justin Martyr) have proposed that Plato (for example) went to the Kingdom of Heaven, and apologized for his heresy as a consequence of being born prior to Christ's ministry. Not so for Epicurus.

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2023 at 6:50 PM

In a similar vein as what Nate just posted that the Christians would have held the Epicureans in particularly low regard there is this from Alexander the Oracle Monger, where again the other schools were willing to collaborate with the revealed religionists, but the Epicureans were not:

The prosperity of the oracle is perhaps not so wonderful, when one learns what sensible, intelligent questions were in fashion with its votaries. Well, it was war to the knife between him and Epicurus, and no wonder. What fitter enemy for a charlatan who patronized miracles and hated truth, than the thinker who had grasped the nature of things and was in solitary possession of that truth? As for the Platonists, Stoics, Pythagoreans, they were his good friends; he had no quarrel with them. But the unmitigated Epicurus, as he used to call him, could not but be hateful to him, treating all such pretensions as absurd and puerile.

[Epicurus.info](http://epicurus.info) : [E-Texts](#) : [Alexander the Oracle Monger](#)