

# Sports are fun but is exercise really something Epicurus would have lauded?

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 14, 2024 at 1:33 PM

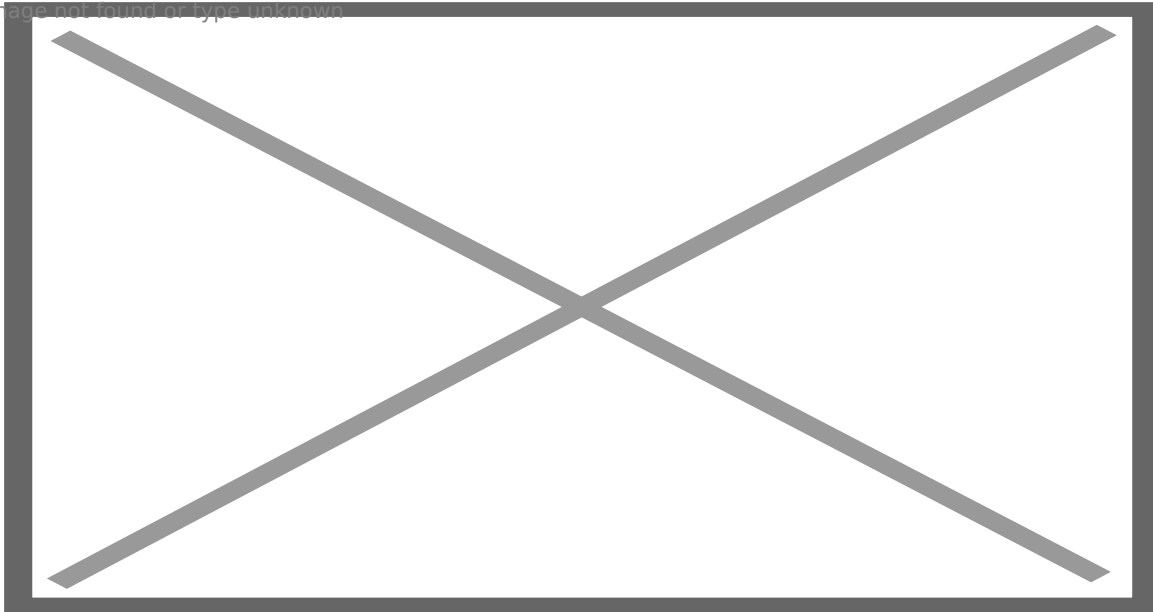
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Observations of hunter gatherers today who spend much of the day just sitting around suggest that our remote ancestors were in fact no less couch potatoes than we are. Dan Buettner who has studied populations around the globe with a high concentration of people blessed with stunning longevity shows their lifestyles to have many traits in common. Among these traits and perhaps the most surprising is the fact that they never exercise. Instead, they tend to engage in lots of natural low-Intensity physical activity, mostly just walking around.

As Lieberman shows, the commodification of exercise today has led to unnecessary hustles, psychological pressures, weird mental complexes, injuries and expenses. Even in antiquity there were those who said that people highly passionate about exercise are weird. Fitness junkie Ross Enamait who wrote some excellent training manuals says he's been called crazy for his fitness passion.

What are your personal views on the issue? Does exercise make a lot of sense from an Epicurean point of view? Why shouldn't the time and money spent torturing the body with high-Intensity exercises just for some vague notion of 'feeling good about yourself' and impressing your 'bros' not be better invested in more pleasurable activities? Epicurus sure loved visiting the theater but as far I know he didn't visit gyms at all. Do we have any evidence that he did?

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[Exercised: Why Something We Never Evolved to Do Is Healthy and Rewarding](#)

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## Post by “Joshua” of March 14, 2024 at 7:13 PM

I think this is a very interesting question, and any attempt at an answer will probably be frustrated by the lack of surviving evidence. It's true that the Greeks were a very sporting people; so much so that they quite literally set their clocks by it. The four year Olympiad, coupled with other lesser Panhellenic games, gave structure to their reckoning of years in much the same way that the Romans used Consulships, the English used reigns, and we use decades.

Tertullian, in his contemptible joy and relish upon imagining the fate of the damned in hell, derides various mainstays of Classical culture;

### Quote

How vast a spectacle then bursts upon the eye! What there excites my admiration? what my derision? Which sight gives me joy? which rouses me to exultation?--as I see so many illustrious **monarchs**, whose reception into the heavens was publicly announced, groaning now in the lowest darkness with great Jove himself, and those, too, who bore witness of their exultation; **governors of provinces**, too, who persecuted the Christian name, in fires more fierce than those with which in the days of

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their pride they raged against the followers of Christ. What world's wise men besides, the very **philosophers**, in fact, who taught their followers that God had no concern in ought that is sublunary, and were wont to assure them that either they had no souls, or that they would never return to the bodies which at death they had left, now covered with shame before the poor deluded ones, as one fire consumes them! **Poets** also, trembling not before the judgment-seat of Rhadamanthus or Minos, but of the unexpected Christ! I shall have a better opportunity then of hearing the **tragedians**, louder-voiced in their own calamity; of viewing the **[comic] play-actors**, much more "dissolute" in the dissolving flame; of looking upon the **charioteer**, all glowing in his chariot of fire; of beholding the **wrestlers**, not in their gymnasia, but tossing in the fiery billows; unless even then I shall not care to attend to such ministers of sin, in my eager wish rather to fix a gaze insatiable on those whose fury vented itself against the Lord. (De Spectaculis, Chapter XXX)

This from the group that claims to have 'built Western civilization'. 🙄

Among the classes of people condemned by Tertullian, there were, of course, people who took to more than one discipline. Cleanthes, successor to Zeno, was a wrestler before he turned philosopher. Socrates, in an often paraphrased quotation from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, had this to say;

#### Quote

It is a base thing for a man to wax old in careless self-neglect before he has lifted up his eyes and seen what manner of man he was made to be, in the full perfection of bodily strength and beauty. But these glories are withheld from him who is guilty of self-neglect, for they are not wont to blaze forth unbidden.

Lucretius does have Epicurus 'lifting up his eyes', but to a different purpose;

#### Quote

Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret  
in terris oppressa gravi sub religione,  
quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat  
65horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,  
primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra  
est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra;  
quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti  
murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem  
70inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arcta  
naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret.

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Quote

When human life, all too conspicuous,  
Lay foully groveling on earth, weighed down  
By grim Religion looming from the skies,  
Horribly threatening mortal men, a man,  
A Greek, first raised his mortal eyes  
Bravely against this menace. No report  
Of gods, no lightning-flash, no thunder-peal  
Made this man cower, but drove him all the more  
With passionate manliness of mind and will  
To be the first to spring the tight-barred gates  
Of Nature's hold asunder.

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I should rather, if I accuse anyone, accuse them of self-neglect who have been inattentive about sharpening their minds, the stakes are so much higher.

Epicurus may have been in ill health for a good part of his life, a sure sign of moral corruption to those who misconstrued man's relationship with nature.

Lucretius does mention bodily strength several times, most notably in Book 5 in his discussion of primitive humans, but there again he comes back around to the faculty he deems more important;

Quote

Kings began to build cities and to found citadels, to be for themselves a stronghold and a refuge; and they parceled out and gave flocks and fields to each man for his beauty or his strength or understanding; for beauty was then of much avail, and strength stood high. Thereafter property was invented and gold found, which easily robbed the strong and beautiful of honor; for, for the most part, however strong men are born, however beautiful their body, they follow the lead of the richer man. Yet if a man would steer his life by true reasoning, it is great riches to a man to live thriftily with calm mind; for never can he lack for a little.

The other side of the story is that people in Lucretius' day were likely far more active than most of us in developed countries today. I have no doubt than many an old bread-kneading and water-carrying granny could put my forearms to shame.

Some day I'll stop quoting Thoreau, but it is not this day;

## Quote

“If you would get exercise, go in search of the springs of life. Think of a man's swinging dumbbells for his health, when those springs are bubbling up in far-off pastures unsought by him!”

Your mileage may vary.

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## Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2024 at 7:34 PM

I think Peter's post is interesting and points up the need to be clear about context. If "exercise" is what we do to repair the damage from being absolutely sedentary and eating a terrible diet full of hazardous chemicals and overloaded with carbohydrates, then I would say Epicurus would \*not\* stress exercise as the remedy -- he would go to the root of the problem and look to uproot the cause, rather than apply a "remedy" to a problem that would not exist but for stupid behavior that caused damage that would not otherwise have occurred.

If 'exercise' is the kind of normal activity level that Peter is talking about as the sort of "natural state," then that kind of exercise is presumably desirable.

I take Peter as focusing on those who hype exercise out of its natural place, and I expect Epicurus would tell an exercise fanatic to get their minds focused on the true goal of life just like Epicurus told Polyaneus to get over his fixation with geometry/mathematics.

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## Post by “DavidN” of March 20, 2024 at 8:35 PM

### [Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

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of people blessed with stunning longevity shows their lifestyles to have many traits in common. Among these traits and perhaps the most surprising is the fact that they never exercise. Instead, they tend to engage in lots of natural low-Intensity physical activity, mostly just walking around.

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Metrodorus would say that we should endure lesser pains to enjoy greater pleasures or avoid greater pains. From this line of thought we should expect that if we live an overly sedentary life as many people do in modern times, that artificial exercise might be necessary as maintenance for health.

The hunter gathers and farmers of our ancestry may have not engaged in what we consider exercise, however they did engage in greater physical activity than modern day humans in many ways. Early hunters were endurance hunters, long distance runner who would need to stalk prey upto 8 hours a day. Whatever they may have done with their down time I think their time spent hunting would outweigh their sedentary time. In the same way anyone who has worked on a farm can attest to the same physical nature of farm life. These lifestyles didn't need the addition of what we consider exercise as it was built into there lifestyle.

I do agree that alot of the mentality around modern exercise is likely unhealthy, this however does not negate the benefits of moderate exercise applied to an otherwise sedentary lifestyle.

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**Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 21, 2024 at 6:41 AM**

[Quote from DavidN](#)

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As Lieberman says in the book, the modern hunter-gatherers he observed don't engage in any physical activity that exceeds moderate levels of exertion - not even on the hunt - and if you ignored the fact that they don't have a couch and a television you could easily call them incorrigible couch-potatoes because they spend surprisingly many hours just sitting on their bottoms.

I agree that exercise can be a good thing (although the true reason why the masses engage in it is rather the vain desire to conform to contemporary beauty ideals) and it's almost necessary today but its benefits have mostly to do with counteracting the effects of a hideous diet rather than our inborn and natural tendency to sit a lot.

The idea of the hard-working peasant who breaks his back working from sunrise to sunset is also mostly a modern misunderstanding. Peasant life was indeed miserable but what really made it so was the fact that these were effectively enslaved people. They had to work not just for themselves but also for pampered local aristocracies and they were also subjected to periodic depredations by marauders and militaries. We have many reports of Roman army personnel of all centuries fleecing and abusing the local peasantry.

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## Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 31, 2024 at 10:51 AM

The master writes:

"The happy and blessed state belongs [not to abundance of riches or dignity of position or any office or power, but to freedom from pain and moderation in feelings] and an attitude of mind which imposes the limits ordained by nature."

The obsession with exercise is precisely such a case of a mind \*not\* respecting the limits ordained by nature.

It is no accident then that the 'motivational' language employed by fanatical 'exercists' (as Lieberman calls them) is full of slogans like 'limits are destined to be overcome!'

The desire to 'build' 30kg additional muscle mass into your body is not a desire that fulfills any purpose that natural selection designed the human body for. It's not even a practical need that

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society requires. Workers from developing countries who easily carry 100kg sacks on their backs tend to have slim and lean bodies. They don't have the body gym rats usually aspire to because nature has no need of it.