

# Discussion Plan For Chapter 01 "A Synoptic View of Epicureanism" (Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus And His Philosophy")

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## Discussion Plan For Chapter 1 "A Synoptic View Of Epicureanism" (Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus And His Philosophy")

Many thanks to BWDS for the first draft of this outline, which is available [here!](#)

The "interactive" version of this outline is available [here.](#)

### 1. Overview Of The Historical Background of Epicurean Philosophy

1. At the outset this must be emphasized: At one and the same time **Epicurus was both the most revered and most reviled** of all founders of Greco-Roman philosophical schools.
  1. For seven hundred years Epicurus was very popular throughout the Greco-Roman world; his images were displayed, his handbooks memorized and carried by students, and on the twentieth of every month his followers assembled in his name.
  2. Throughout the same period Epicurus' enemies ceaselessly reviled him, he was attacked by Platonists, Stoics, and Christians, and his name was an abomination to the Jews.
  3. Therefore much of what has been written about Epicurus in both the ancient and modern world is wrong.
2. Epicurus employed teaching devices which will are important for understanding his philosophy.
  1. Setting The 'Attitude' or (diathesis, Greek). This device stresses at the very beginning the attitude to take toward the subject, just as the first of the [Principal doctrines](#) set for the attitude to take toward gods, death, pleasure, and pain.
  2. Start With An 'Outline' or the 'Synoptic View.' This means starting with the 'big picture' before proceeding to detailed discussion of the finer points, so that the fine points are kept in perspective. Epicurus' teachings were therefore presented in order from the general to the particular:
    1. The Progression in Physics:
      1. The first principles of Physics were presented as the Twelve Elementary Principles
      2. The "First Epitome" of Physics was the Letter to Herodotus

3. The "Second Epitome" of Physics is what we have today as the material adapted into poem form in Lucretius "On The Nature of Things"
4. The Full presentation of Physics was the Thirty-Seven Books on Nature.
2. (Note: Compare in Ethics: Ethical passages of 40 Doctrines > Letter to Menoecus > Longer Works Now Lost. Compare in Canonics: Epistemological passages of 40 Doctrines > Epistemological passages in "On the Nature of Things" > the "Celestial Book" on Canonics now lost.)

## 2. Warning: View The Literature On Epicurus With Great Care

1. Little remains of the trustworthy texts other than a small amount of original material from Epicurus, supplemented by the poem of Lucretius. The secondary literature is mostly hostile and cannot be received uncritically. Most modern scholars prefer to "hunt with the pack" and take the secondary literature at face value. This results in the greatly distorted picture of Epicurus dominant today.
2. In separating out the false material it is useful to employ another device used by Epicurus: that of contrasting and opposing "True Opinions" against "False Opinions."

## 3. TRUE AND FALSE OPINIONS ABOUT EPICURUS:

1. Epicurus' Place In Greek Philosophy:
  1. **True:** Epicurus came immediately after Plato (idealism; absolutism) and Pyrrho (the skeptic). Platonism and Skepticism were among Epicurus' chief abominations.
  2. **False:** Epicurus taught in response to Stoicism. (False because Epicurean philosophy was fully developed before Zeno began teaching Stoicism.)
2. Epicurus' Attitude Toward Learning:
  1. **True:** Epicurus was well educated and a trained thinker
  2. **False:** Epicurus was an ignoramus and an enemy of all culture.
3. Epicurus' Goal For Himself And His Work:
  1. **True:** Epicurus was not only a philosopher but a moral reformer rebelling against his teachers.
  2. **False:** Epicurus was nothing more than a copycat who was ungrateful to his teachers.
4. Epicurus' Place in Greek Scientific Thought:
  1. **True:** Epicurus was returning to the Ionian tradition of thought which had been interrupted by Socrates and Plato. Epicurus was an Anti-Platonist and a penetrating critic of Platonism.
  2. **False:** Epicurean scientific thought simply copied Democritus.
5. Epicurus' Role As a Systematizer:
  1. **True:** As with Herbert Spencer or Auguste Comte, Epicurus was attempting a synthesis and critique of all prior philosophical thought.
  2. **False:** Epicurus was a sloppy and unorganized thinker whose system-building is not worth attention.
6. Epicurus' Dogmatism:

1. **True:** Epicurus' strength was that he promulgated a dogmatic philosophy, actuated by a passion for inquiry to find certainty, and a detestation of skepticism, which he imputed even to Plato.
  2. **False:** Epicurus' demerit was that he promulgated a dogmatic philosophy, because he renounced inquiry.
7. Epicurus' View of Truth:
1. **True:** Epicurus exalted Nature as the norm of truth, revolting against Plato, who had preached "reason" as the norm and considered "Reason" to have a divine existence of its own. Epicurus studied and taught the nature and use of sensations, and the role in determining that which we consider to be true.
  2. **False:** Epicurus was an empiricist in the modern sense, declaring sensation to be the only source of knowledge and all sensations to be "true."
8. Epicurus' Method For Determining Truth:
1. **True:** Epicurus taught reasoning chiefly by deduction. For example, atoms cannot be observed directly; their existence and properties must be determined by deduction, and the principles thereby deduced serve as standards for assessing truth. In this Epicurus was adopting the procedures of Euclid and parting company with both Plato and the Ionian scientists.
  2. **False:** Epicurus was a strict empiricist and taught reasoning mainly by induction
9. Epicurus' As A Man of Action
1. **True:** Epicurus was the first missionary philosophy. Epicurus was by disposition combative and he was by natural gifts a leader, organizer, and campaigner.
  2. **False:** Epicurus was effeminate and a moral invalid; a passivist who taught retirement from and non-engagement with the world.
10. Epicurus' View of Self-Interest
1. **True:** Epicureanism was the first world philosophy, acceptable to both Greek and barbarian. Epicurus taught that we should make friends wherever possible.
  2. **False:** Epicurus was a totally egoistic hedonist ruled solely by a narrow view of his own self-interest.
11. Epicurus Is Of Little Relevance to the Development of Christianity
1. **True:** Epicurus reoriented emphasis from political virtues to social virtues, and developed a wider viewpoint applicable to all humanity.
  2. **False:** Epicurus was an enemy of all religion and there is no trace of his influence in the "New Testament."

#### 4. The Cultural Context

1. Born in 341 BC, seven years after death of Plato and seven years before Alexander crossed Hellespont to conquer Persia.
2. Platonism was dominant in higher education.
3. When Epicurus arrived in Athens the Cynics were in revolt against conventional philosophy.

4. Epicurus owes debt to the later Aristotle in that Epicurus focused on organic life instead of inorganic, leading to setting Nature as furnishing the norm rather than hypostatized Reason as taught by Plato.
5. Chief negative influences of the time were Platonism and oratory, both of which were focused on the political.
6. Epicurus declared war on the whole system of Platonic education. More than half of Principle Doctrines are direct contradictions of Platonism.
7. It is a major mistake to consider Stoicism to be the primary antagonist of Epicureans - this ignores that Stoicism was developed after Epicurean philosophy: the main enemy of Epicurus was Platonism.

### **5. Epicurus Was A Man of Erudition**

1. Some detractors of Epicurus claim he was an ignoramus and enemy of all culture. This is absurd.
2. Epicurus was precocious as a child and challenged his teachers on the origin of the universe.
3. Epicurus no doubt received Platonic schooling in geometry, dialectic, and rhetoric.
4. Epicurus shows great familiarity with Platonic texts and more than half of his doctrines are rejections of Platonic positions.
5. Epicurus declared dialectic a superfluity but criticized Plato with acumen and wrote against the Megarians, the contemporary experts in logic.
6. Epicurus rejected geometry as relevant to ethics but adopted the procedures of Euclid in his own textbooks. Epicurus refuted mathematicians' claims that matter is infinitely divisible.
7. Epicurus was clearly familiar with Aristotle and adopted many of his findings.

### **6. Epicurus Was A Moral Reformer**

1. Epicurus is criticized as ungrateful to his teachers and influences, but this is because he was a moral reformer, and reformers feel themselves absolved from debts of gratitude to those they are rebelling against.
2. The attitude of Epicurus might be compared to St. Paul, because Epicurus was delivering new truth that did not come from other men - but not in a "divinely revealed" way as claimed by religious imposters.

### **7. Epicurus Was A Man of Science**

1. In role of natural scientist he became - in particular - the antagonist of Plato.
2. Prior to Epicurus there had been two major currents in Greek Philosophy:
  1. The first was that of the Aegean Greeks/Ionians, who were observational and speculative. These were interested in studying change in nature, and devoted to discovering what unchanging something underlay all changing things. This study led to the development of atomic theory - the universe as made up of divisible bodies that were themselves composed of indivisible atoms as the ultimate

- structure of universe. This is the line which includes Democritus and Epicurus.
2. The later line was that of the Greeks in Italy – these were mathematical and contemplative rather than observational and speculative. These “Italian” schools were “addicted to the sitting posture” – they were not interested in physical change or natural processes, and instead focused on contemplation of ‘forms’ and geometry. This is the line which includes Pythagoras and Plato, who developed this into “absolute reason contemplating absolute truth.”
  3. The key error of the Platonic line arose from their attempt to transfer the precise concepts of geometry to ethics and politics, just as modern thinkers attempt to transfer the concepts of biological evolution to history and sociology.
    1. Especially enticing as a mistake is to make improper use of “definition.” Definition is the creation of geometricians – created by defining straight lines, equilateral triangles, and other regular figures.
    2. Plato sought to transfer this process to ethics: If straight lines and equilateral triangles can be defined, why not justice, piety, temperance, and other virtues?
    3. The problem with this process is that it is reasoning by analogy, and reasoning by analogy is one of the trickiest of logical procedures: it holds good only between sets of true similars – and virtues and triangles are not true similars!
    4. It does not follow that just because equilateral triangles can be precisely defined that justice can be precisely defined.
  4. The Deceptiveness of Analogy does not prevent it from flourishing, especially when combined with the method of analysis by question and answer: dialectic, which is the “dramatization of logic.”
  5. The Platonists then fell for another huge error: The quest for a definition of a virtue, such as “justice” presumes the existence of the thing to be defined! If equilateral triangles did not exist, they could not be defined. But if we assume that “justice” can be defined, then we assume that “justice” exists just as equilateral triangles exist – and this is not necessarily so.
    1. The Platonic “theory of ideas” arose from the view of an “idea” as something having a shape or form with independent existence, and it is false to assume that justice or other virtues have an independent existence.
    2. Epicurus rejected this theory of ideas. Starting with a materialist view of the universe he denied the possibility of any eternal existences except atoms and space. Once “ideas” of this nature are rejected, we have no use for the tools by which ideas are constructed; we have no use for “dramatized logic” – we depend on science verified through sensation.
  6. The Platonists inherited from Pythagoras the belief in rebirth/transmigration of souls, and the view that the body is a tomb or prison-house for the soul, which blurred our reason and prevented perfection of knowledge. Epicurus rejected all of this as skepticism.
  7. The Platonists emphasized application of geometry to astronomy. Epicurus observed that Plato as assuming the validity of sensation in the study of astronomy, by denying the validity of sensation in the study of things here on Earth, and this was a glaring inconsistency.

8. The Platonists argued that circular motion was the only perfect and eternal motion and was therefore identifiable with reason itself, which meant reason was identifiable with the Divine nature, and planets/stars were declared to be gods. Epicurus held this to be absurd, not the least of which reasons was that it was absurd to consider gods to be hurtling balls of fire.

## **8. Epicurus as Philosopher**

1. The most preposterous criticism of Epicurus is that he was a dullard or charlatan. In truth Epicurus was among the greatest synthesizers of philosophy.
  1. Epicurus saw error in separating phenomena from matter: he saw how ridiculous it was to allege, like Plato, that "horseness" was a real existence, but that horses were mere apparitions.
  2. Epicurus saw error in thinking that justice could exist apart from conduct.
  3. Epicurus saw error in thinking color has existence apart from arrangements and motions of atoms comprising the thing that we see as having color.
  4. Epicurus saw that "some form of religion" is indispensable (while excluding divine government of universe, regimentation, political enforcement, forced belief)

## **9. The First Dogmatic Philosophy**

1. Moral reform requires dogmatism, and requires more than speculative thinking. Philosophy must be useful for happiness and this is impossible without faith, and faith is impossible without certainty - therefore philosophy must be dogmatic: "The wise man will not be a doubter but will dogmatize."
2. Dogmatism is the reaction to skepticism. The man who denies the possibility of knowledge is challenging others to declare that knowledge is possible. Epicurus took up this challenge and fought against it in Pyrrho, Plato, Aristotle, and even Democritus.
3. Epicurus was alerted to the challenge of skepticism by his teacher Nausiphanes, who admired the placidity of Pyrrho but rebelled against his skepticism.
4. Nausiphanes erected a criterion of truth he called the Tripod, which was so named because it stands on three legs.
5. Epicurus took the Tripod and elaborated it into his own Canon of Truth, composed of:
  1. The Sensations - The evidence furnished by the five senses.
  2. The Anticipations - The evidence furnished by innate ideas (such as in field of justice) which exist in advance of and anticipate experience.
  3. The Feelings - Pleasure and pain - Nature's educators - her "Go" and "Stop" signals.
6. Epicurus is criticized for supposedly discouraging inquiry, but it should be recognized that (like Plato) Epicurus distinguished between people of different levels of education. However Epicurus saw no need for deception, and insisted his teachings were for all men, with simply differences in level of detail as set by their own capacities and opportunities.
7. Epicureans were not limited in any way and free to pursue their own tastes and talents, just as Lucretius pursued poetry, Polyenus was an expert in geometry, and Asclepiades

was an expert physician. Epicurus himself was an expert researcher into natural science.

## 10. The New Order of Nature

1. Especially important in the Epicurean canon is that "Reason" is not included as a criterion of truth.
2. The Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings are the only direct contact between man and his physical and social environment. Because they are direct contacts, they acquire a priority over reason and elevate Nature over Reason as affording a norm of truth.
3. The Platonists followed the "Italian" Greek school model of Arithmetic to Geometry to Astronomy to find an inflexible Celestial order of nature.
4. The Ionians followed the model of studying nature chiefly here on Earth, taking reason for granted as a faculty and applying it to observe inorganic, and then organic, nature, leading to the conclusion that Nature does nothing at random - a Terrestrial order of Nature.
5. Epicurus followed the Ionian pattern and extended the Aristotelian model, concluding that Nature provides the norm rather than Reason as argued by Plato.
6. This difference in perspective between the Terrestrial Order and the alleged Celestial Order led to the distinctly different philosophical directions of great importance, for example:
  1. In the interpretation of "Living according to Nature":
    1. The Platonists and Stoics argued that living according to Nature meant imitation of inflexible celestial order by a rigid and unemotional morality.
    2. Epicurus argued that living according to Nature meant living in accord with the laws of our being, centrally including the emotions as a normal, integral, and guiding part, undeserving of suspicion or distrust.
  2. In the interpretation of "Justice":
    1. The Platonists require a definition of justice and they invoke dialectic as the tool and (for example) devote ten books of the Republic to the quest. In the background of their analysis are the mathematics of ration and the musical notion of harmony. After great examination they eventually conclude that justice is a harmony of the three parts of the soul: (1) reason, (2) passion, and (3) desire, and that "justice" in the state is a harmony of the constituent classes.
    2. Epicurus, in contrast, looked to the feelings as the criterion, and observed that "injustice" hurts as an injury, and "justice" promotes happiness feels pleasant. In this analysis "justice" is the agreement among people not to injure or be injured. This comes directly from Nature and no dialectic is needed to discover it - only observation. The sense that allows us to translate justice into a pleasant feeling and injustice into an unpleasant feeling is innate - it is an Anticipation or Prolepsis that exists in advance of and anticipates experience. Even certain animals, including elephants, have such an innate capacity.

7. Plato was complicating philosophy for the sake of the few who find self-gratification in complexity; Epicurus simplified philosophy for the sake of the many who wished to live by it.
8. Epicurus analyzed human nature just as Aristotle analyzed plants and animals, and in so doing Epicurus:
  1. Categorized man's direct contacts with nature into Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings;
  2. Categorized desires into natural and necessary, natural but not necessary, and neither natural nor necessary.
  3. Categorized the causes of injury inflicted by men as caused by (1) hatred, (2) envy, or (3) contempt.
9. The Canon was attacked, but the Stoics adopted the idea of the prolepsis/anticipations, and this view appeared commonplace to Cicero.
  1. The reliance on the sensations was attacked by misrepresenting that Epicurus held all sensations to be true. (The fallacy of this is apparent – would Epicurus have contended that our vision informs us no more correctly about a cow at twenty paces than at half a mile?)
  2. The Canon was misrepresented to be a substitute for logic. This is false because the function of ancient logic was to score debating points against opponents; the Canon is an individual test requiring no opponents. This the way a modern scientific researcher approaches his work – through hypothesis, putting it to test, and observing (through the senses) the reaction.

## **11. Epicurus as an Educator**

1. Epicurus took over textbook form from Euclid. Plato had embraced geometry but employed artistic prose for his proofs. Epicurus rejected geometry, but embraced the bald and clear style of Euclid in composing his proofs.
2. Epicurus looked to Nature as the teacher which revealed the true meaning of words and the right kind of style: the sole requisite of writing is clarity. Epicurus denied that Nature was either a dialectician or a rhetorician or a poet.
3. Epicurus encouraged memorization of the fundamental axioms as an aid to applying them properly.
4. The Epicurean method stresses deductive reasoning from first principles. The Twelve Elementary Principles were stated and demonstrated as theorems, and each theorem became a major premise for the deduction of further theorems, which were then confirmed by the evidence of the Sensations, which operate as a criteria.
5. Epicurus was NOT an empiricist: the status of Sensations is that of a witness in court limited to confirming the truth (or falsity) of given proposition.
6. The Epicurean method of teaching is preserved to a significant extent in Philodemus, "On Frankness of Speech" recovered from Herculaneum

## **12. The First Missionary Philosophy**

1. Epicureanism was the first and only real missionary philosophy produced by Greeks.
2. Plato had founded his Academy despite the absence of any (known) model for a school.
3. The model the Greeks were most familiar with was the city-state, and this model was pursued by Pythagoras.
4. The Cynics had escaped the political obsession of Plato and similar Greeks. So did Epicurus.
5. Epicurus believed a certain modicum of governmental control was necessary but rejected doctrine of Plato and others that the state stood in the place of a parent.
6. A closer model probably in Epicurus' mind was the example of Aristotle, whose school was more of a research institution and less of a one-man enterprise than Plato's Academy. Epicurus had with himself three colleagues from the beginning, and those left in Lampsacus continued to study and write separately.
7. Most likely model for Epicurus was the Hippocratic medical fraternity. Epicurus saw his mission as extending to all mankind, not just within a certain political limit.
8. If philosophy is to heal maladies of soul, must be divorced from politics...healing was for all people, regardless of political affiliation
9. Every Epicurean convert was a missionary. Philosophy should begin at home and be disseminated from the home. Thus the philosophical movement was independent of schools and tutors.
10. Epicurus is falsely denounced as effeminate and moral invalidism, but the truth is that Epicurus had a crusading spirit that endowed Epicureanism with a tenacity unequalled by rival creeds, leading it to flourish for almost seven centuries, in contrast to Stoicism which was in vogue for a much shorter time.

### **13. The First World Philosophy**

1. Epicureanism is for all people and not limited to any political system.
2. System of pamphlets and handbooks made Epicureanism readily transportable.
3. Epicurus is misclassified as "egoistic hedonist" - when Epicurus embarked on a campaign to "awake the world to the blessedness of the happy life" his philosophy became a "higher hedonism."

### **14. Predecessor Of Christianity**

1. Spirit, procedures and certain doctrines were adopted by Christianity
2. Both sects (Christianity and Epicureanism):
  1. Appealed to lower and middle classes;
  2. Held meetings in private houses;
  3. Held ceremonies to performed in memory of their founders;
  4. Carried small images of their founders.

### **15. The World Perceived Two Faces of Epicurean Philosophy**

1. The Repellent Side:
  1. Rejection of immortality and judgment after death

2. "Hedonism"
3. "Apolitical stance"
2. The Attractive Side
  1. Ethical creed of love / friendship
  2. The kindly social virtues than make for peace and good companionship.
3. Epicureanism won numerous followers but many enemies, especially among scholars, and the candid student should be warned repeatedly against their tendency to malign and misrepresent true Epicurean philosophy.

## **16. Survival**

1. Epicurean philosophy continues under different names in many places.
2. In friendly terms in some parts of Christianity and mixed philosophies
3. In unfriendly terms in most Jewish, Christian, and opposing school literature
4. In political teachings such as Locke and Jefferson.

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