

"Self Help Is Like a Vaccine" by Bryan Caplan

Post by "Cleveland Okie" of October 3, 2024 at 12:23 PM

I went through the forum trying to find the right place to post this, I hope I am correct.

"Self Help Is Like a Vaccine" is not an Epicurean book per se, so let me explain what the book is and why I have posted about it.

Bryan Caplan is an economist, a university professor and a blogger, and he has lately been publishing a series of books that reprint his blog posts, collected together by subject area. This is a collection of some of his advice pieces. I mention Caplan here because as I have mentioned before, I became interested in Epicureanism because Dr. Caplan recommends that everyone read the "Letter to Menoeceus."

In the new book, Caplan recommends that people "repeatedly read" the "Letter to Menoeceus" (in the "Make Your Own Bubble in 10 Easy Steps" essay). He also mentions Epicurus in a couple of other places, including referring to Epicurus as "the great Epicurus."

I like the book, but let me also say something about the main reason I am bringing it up. I discovered Buddhism when I was a teenager, and for decades I read about it, tried meditating on and off, etc. (My favorite Buddhism book is "What the Buddha Taught" by Walpola Rahula).

Although obviously I have heard about Epicureanism for decades, I did not really discover the philosophy until I ran across one of Caplan's recommendations to read the "Letter to Menoeceus" (he has repeatedly recommended it!), I sat down to read it, and I realized it made a lot of sense. Since then, I have been reading one book after another about Epicureanism (I am currently reading "A Few Days in Athens" by Frances Wright.)

My point is this: I didn't read the "Letter to Menoeceus" until I was in my 60s! If only I had read it earlier!

So I think a lot lately about what we can do to bring Epicureanism to the attention of more people, turning over ideas in my mind. And as I am grateful to Caplan, I feel obliged to let y'all know about his new book.

Post by "Eikadistes" of October 3, 2024 at 1:13 PM

It is never too early, nor late late to preserve the health of one's soul. 😊

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of October 3, 2024 at 10:09 PM

That's a comforting thought from the man himself!

But I'm not worried about me -- it's a privilege that I finally found Epicureanism. I worry about the people who will never have a chance. Stoicism may be having a moment, but Epicureanism isn't, at least yet.

Post by “SillyApe” of October 8, 2024 at 8:10 AM

I think our society is slowly becoming more aligned with Epicureanism, even if most people have never heard about Epicurus. After centuries of religious domination over our culture, when most people were taught to pursue ideals of "purity" and "piety" and to focus on the afterlife, now more and more people have become materialists(in the physics sense) and have set themselves to pursue pleasure, as built in their nature.

Obviously, many people will struggle in their journeys, especially because many have been misguided by promises that pleasure can only be found in extreme consumerism or because they haven't been exposed to the wisdom of how to deal with life in a way that maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 8, 2024 at 9:18 AM

[Quote from SillyApe](#)

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[Quote from SillyApe](#)

the wisdom of how to deal with life in a way that maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain.

Yes, you can certainly see situations in which individuals are implementing good choices and avoidances.

And, yet there are many areas in which some of the "stickier" existential Epicurean philosophical points are not making much headway.

For example, death with dignity: on the one hand it may seem like this is moving forward, but you can read an article [here](#) about how few states in the US allow it (and you cannot just fly to another state, but you have to be a resident of that state and go through a very long process). And if you read the news about what happened with the [Sarco pod](#), you will also see how the resistance (likely due to deeply held religious/spiritual beliefs).

Post by “SillyApe” of October 8, 2024 at 5:53 PM

I agree. I don't think society is being rebuilt upon Epicurean pillars nor do I think that the influence of Christian thought will fade into obscurity (even if the supernatural beliefs become weaker). I think, however, that the framework through which people make decisions nowadays is becoming more hedonistic and less idealistic, which may facilitate the spread of Epicureanism (not that I think Epicureanism works for everyone. It works for me, but other people can find their own paths).

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of October 8, 2024 at 10:36 PM

This is an interesting discussion, but I still wonder what can be done to bring Epicureanism to the attention of more people, so that they at least have the opportunity to find out about it. Should I try to create and post Epicurean memes on social media? Should I launch an Epicurean blog somewhere? (I ran a search for "Epicurean" to see if there are any such blogs on Substack, and all of the ones I could find with the word "Epicurean" in the title were food blogs!)

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 8, 2024 at 10:43 PM

[Quote from Cleveland Okie](#)

Should I try to create and post Epicurean memes on social media?

I would love to see more Epicurean memes. I post a fair amount in the gallery here, and you'll find plenty on Epicurean memes for hedonistic beings (@EpicureanMemes) on Facebook, and a handful on the r/Epicurean_Philosophy page on Reddit. The more, the merrier!

[Quote from Cleveland Okie](#)

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[Hiram](#) shares his essays from the *Society of Friends of Epicurus* on Substack <<https://hiramcrespo.substack.com>> ultimately hosted at <<https://societyofepicurus.com>>. There are a number of sites out there that provide educational resources, but I am unfamiliar with other blogs that regularly publish essays. The Lucretius Today podcast definitely fills that audio void!

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 9, 2024 at 9:03 AM

[Quote from Cleveland Okie](#)

(I ran a search for "Epicurean" to see if there are any such blogs on Substack, and all of the ones I could find with the word "Epicurean" in the title were food blogs!)

That gave me an idea...perhaps a food blog combined with Epicurean philosophy! All the epicurean foodies out there may be ready and needing some philosophy! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2024 at 3:06 PM

[Quote from Cleveland Okie](#)

This is an interesting discussion, but I still wonder what can be done to bring Epicureanism to the attention of more people, so that they at least have the opportunity to find out about it. Should I try to create and post Epicurean memes on

social media? Should I launch an Epicurean blog somewhere? (I ran a search for "Epicurean" to see if there are any such blogs on Substack, and all of the ones I could find with the word "Epicurean" in the title were food blogs!)

I think that one of the best things that anyone can do, and for themselves as much as for other people, is to create new content. Blogs if you are more writer than graphics designer, memes/graphics/artwork if you have artistic talent, music if you have musical talent, etc. It helps not only crystalize things in your own mind, but it's surely the best way to work to introduce others to Epicurus. Once they get introduced through an initial article or artwork or meme, we can introduce them to the rest of the "network" and they can pursue the parts that interest them most.

But most of all we need that initial introduction to new people, and everyone can help with that.

If I have a friend whose interested in politics I try to introduce them to Jefferson's views on Epicurus, or Nietzsche's, or someone else that they can connect with.

If they are into history there is Greenblatt's book on the swerve, or if they might be interested in Frances Wright for historical or female-connection or other reason, there's "A Few Days In Athens," which I think is highly underrated.

If they're into poetry there's of course Lucretius from a poetry angle, but I suspect that going to deep on first approach is not a good idea. It seems to me what is most likely to work most often is to provide the individual target person or target audience with a "connection" so that they will see that someone else they admire holds Epicurus in high esteem.

Post by "SillyApe" of October 11, 2024 at 10:15 AM

We can spread Epicurean ideas through many methods: content creation, talking about it to our friends, teaching our children, etc.

On another note, sadly, I don't think Epicureanism is going to be as popular as Stoicism or Buddhism are nowadays, for the simple reason there's not much commercial appeal to it. Love it or hate it, Stoicism and Buddhism have only spread as much as they have because it's easy to glamorize them and to turn them into tools one can use to "succeed" in life(stuff like "use these Stoic lessons to get women to fall for you" or "mindfulness techniques to be more productive at work"). Epicureanism, on the other hand, in my opinion, is too "sane" to be glamorized into these kinds of products(which I hope to be the case, as I don't want Epicureanism to be disturbed and productized like the other traditions I mentioned were).

Post by “Cassius” of October 11, 2024 at 10:36 AM

[Quote from SillyApe](#)

On another note, sadly, I don't think Epicureanism is going to be as popular as Stoicism or Buddhism are nowadays, for the simple reason there's not much commercial appeal to it.

I think you're almost certainly right as a practical prediction, and substantially right that Buddhism and Stoicism appeal to a larger group of people, but I do think it is reasonable to work toward a future in which Epicureanism was as much "a player" as it was in the Roman world of 50 BC and thereabouts.

As I see it the number one hurdle to get across - with nothing else being close - is that of arguing the evidence supporting the view that Epicurus' "absence of pain" does not mean "absence of activity," but instead embraces *every* activity of human life that is not painful. The switch has to be made from thinking that Epicurus was preaching tranquility and asceticism as his goal to understanding it as it appears the ancients understood it: "Pleasure" includes every aspect of life that we find valuable, and given the shortness of life, every mental or physical activity that doesn't lead to "net pain" (when all consequences are considered) is in fact within the term "Pleasure." We even choose pain on a regular basis, when we expect the choice to eventually lead to net pleasure.

There is no reason whatsoever that every normal, vigorous, fundamentally healthy in mind and body, person of any age would not profit from realizing that there is no supernatural god, no absolute virtue, no ideal forms, nor any other supernatural or authoritative force to which we are required to conform, and that our happiness is predominantly in our own hands and within our own control.

Epicurean philosophy will start appealing to a much larger number people when we finally begin to push back against the Platonizing and Stoicizing and Supernaturalizing majority that dominates the world today. As long as the false focus on "tranquility" and "simplicity" and other aspects that are not ends in themselves remains the standard interpretation, Epicurean philosophy will remain in the shadows. However there is no "fate," and the fact that a vigorous Epicurean movement flourished in the ancient world shows that it is possible. What has happened once can happen again, and in fact since we know it is possible, we can infer that it has already happened and will happen in the future an infinite number of times.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 11, 2024 at 11:27 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The switch has to be made from thinking that Epicurus was preaching tranquility and asceticism as his goal to understanding it as it appears the ancients understood it: that "pleasure" includes every aspect of life that we find valuable, and that given the shortness of life - every aspect that isn't unproductively painful is in fact pleasurable. We even choose pain on a regular basis when we expect it to lead to greater pleasure.

On an individual level we can make choices, based on our sensations and our needs. The entire spectrum from quietude/rest to fully active/fast movement is all conducive to bringing pleasure when a person is clear-minded.

Yet, there are still the needs of the "group" and here I am referring to a given group of Epicurean students and friends -- and I think the ultimate goal would be to hold in-person gatherings. If the group has mostly introverts, then the choices for the group will be different than the choices for a group of extroverts. And if you end up with a mixed group of both introverts and extroverts, then perhaps there will be less group cohesion with differing ideas, wants, and needs.

I would venture say that some introverts are more physiologically sensitive to their pain receptors (both bodily and mentally) and also process sensory input differently -- I think I posted some articles over in the "Practical applications/Lifestyle" section of the forum a while ago on this (will need to find them).

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As long as the false focus on "tranquility" and "simplicity" and other aspects that are not ends in themselves remains the standard interpretation, Epicurean philosophy will remain in the shadows.

We need to have a detailed yet quick way show how this false interpretation is incorrect, and use quotes from Epicurean sources -- likely there already something in the FAQ section of the forum. And we all need to be able to explain it in just a few sentences.

Post by "SillyApe" of October 11, 2024 at 1:54 PM

[Cassius](#), I agree that we need to make clear that the Epicurean goal is pleasure, not some vague concept of tranquility/enlightenment. Every time someone searches for Epicureanism on the internet, they always end up being bombarded by someone telling them what Epicurus

meant by "pleasure" was only "tranquility", which, for us who have gone a bit deeper into Epicurean studies, is clearly false(if it were true, Epicurus would have said that good and bad were decided by how much tranquility they bring and not by the sensory experience of pleasure/pain).

The big hurdle here is that, in a sense, Epicureanism "lost" a battle long ago. Christianity ruled the West for far too long. The way people see things is still inherently Christian, even if the religion itself is fading. Pleasure is still seen with a certain distrust. Even for those who don't necessarily hate pleasure, there's still the idea that you must balance pleasure with virtue as if they were opposites(while Epicurus made it clear that the virtues were a way to obtain pleasure). Perhaps that's why marketers were so successful in promoting Stoicism and Buddhism. In addition to their glamorization and foreignness which I mentioned earlier, these are still traditions that have a lot of alignment with Christian values. Stoics believed in an intelligence ruling the World(even if many "modern Stoics" don't like to think about it) and that the virtues were the end in themselves(going back to the Christian need of self-sacrifice and the need to improve oneself in order to resist temptation), while Buddhists preach about love, universal brotherhood, and offer the appeal of supernatural/transcendent forces(which many reject intellectually, but crave internally), all similar to Christian ideals.

I myself rejected Epicureanism the first time I discovered it. After leaving Christianity and studying everything from Stoicism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, finding a school of Philosophy that was materialist and hedonistic at its core, free from all superstition, felt almost wrong, even if deep down, the Epicurean claims made more sense to me than all the other philosophies and traditions I mentioned combined. I guess that, after centuries of being told that we matter to a higher power(or that there's something greater beyond what we can see), it is hard for someone to accept that they are just silly apes, roaming a World that does not care about them, with no intrinsic purpose and with nothing existing after death.

In the end, though, I am glad I left the supposed empty tomb and went in the direction of the Garden.

Post by "Patrikios" of October 11, 2024 at 2:27 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As I see it the number one hurdle to get across - with nothing else being close - is that of arguing the evidence supporting the view that Epicurus' "absence of pain" does not mean "absence of activity," but instead embraces *every* activity of human life that is

not painful.

I can certainly see the value of seeking ataraxia, tranquility of mind. But I understand the greater good we are seeking is **eudaimonia**, happiness. What helped me see the ultimate value of an Epicurean practice is Christos Yapijakis writing on **eustatheia**, “stability”, what medical practitioners today call **homeostasis**, psychosomatic balance.

The writing is: **“Epicurean Stability (eustatheia): A Philosophical Approach of Stress Management”, by Christos Yapijakis and George P. Chrousos**, medical professionals teaching at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

So, **eustatheia** is the goal of complete harmony with mind, body & spirit. But it is the unperturbability, calmness resulting from an epicurean practice that enables us to demonstrate by example the benefits of this practice. I find myself asking: WWED - “what would Epicurus do” in this situation. This can also lead to what athletes like to achieve when they can perform in “the zone”.

One way to consider growing the Epicurean community would be to emphasize the “optimal living”, “be the best you can be”, aspects that results from a practice of achieving physical, mental & spiritual balance (homeostasis) in their lives.

Post by “Cassius” of October 11, 2024 at 3:32 PM

[SillyApe](#) You're certainly right that our current situation is going to be difficult to change, and any changes will be slow and come only with lots of effort. But we today have offsetting technologies and situations that have never before been available in human history, so there's good reason to be hopeful that progress can be made. Even the work we are doing here together would have been impossible much more than a decade ago. it's now so much easier to share information and group-source the research and other work that needs to be done that it's a total game-changer. There are dark clouds of censorship and opinion suppression already here and more on the horizon, but they don't dominate yet, and there is hope that we can stay ahead of that censorship through even better technology.

[Patrikios](#) It has been a great regret of mine that except for communications with Christos and Elli Pensa and perhaps a few others, we've never been able to establish much communication with the Epicurean activists in Greece. Christos certainly does excellent work and I hope over time that will change too. That said, there are definitely different opinions about Epicurus even among those of us who are "activists" on the topic. Christos is excellent in his medical

practitioner approach as to the benefits of balance. From a personal point of view -- almost a "self-help" kind of view - I see appreciate the benefits of that approach. In addition to that, however, I see the goal of "balance" as being only one part of the benefit of Epicurean philosophy. Yes you definitely want "balance" as you live your life and respond to its challenges.

In addition, however, there are major philosophical issues that Epicurus was addressing that tend to get crowded out if one focuses only on "balance" or "tranquility" or any other single tool toward the ultimate goal. I suppose one might say that it is important to take a "balanced" approach even to balance, and to recognize that there are many other day to day decisions that must be made on which Epicurus had very many important things to say.

Many of these are very complicated philosophical problems require very uncomfortable decision-making given our current world circumstances. The more one thinks about it, the more the difficulty that faced Epicurus comes into focus. What single word, with what kind of definition, can possibly express adequately the complete meaning of "the highest good" or "the goal of life?" "Happiness" is far too ambiguous. It is claimed by far too many contradictory schools and viewpoints. Only "pleasure," which is tied tightly to the natural faculty of pleasure and pain, can do that job clearly. And even then, "pleasure" can full that role only if it is adequately placed in the context of holding that life itself is the irreducible requirement of anything that is desirable. Only In the context of seeing that life-after-death and supernatural realms are equally fictitious, can we see that any kind of life at all, so long as it is not dominated by pain, is worthy of being considered a happy one. Of course we each have opinions as to what *type* of pleasures suit us best, but it is "pleasure" that is the general category that makes life worth living. "Happiness" and many other words can be helpful, but only if they too are tightly tied to the natural feelings of pleasure and pain as Epicurus did. To cite what Torquatus says in *On Ends*, the wise man always has more reason for joy than for vexation.

I think if Epicurean philosophy is ever to break out of its current "backwater" in popular discussion, we'll need to address the whole spectrum of what Epicurus had to say. There are very many excellent minds in the modern Greek Epicurean world and I hope over time we can engage with more people around the world who are interested in this project. That will involve everyone including especially younger people who are not so easily taken in by thinking that "tranquility" is enough of a goal for their lives. On the other hand, neither will they embrace "Pleasure" unless it is explained to them the sweeping nature of the term in Epicurean philosophy. I am convinced, however, that the texts support ample support for the interpretations of "tranquility," "pleasure," "virtue" - and yes, even "gods," which Epicurus advocated. As [SillyApe](#) said, it's not going to be easy, and many texts have been lost, but what remains - combined with the same common-sense reasoning Epicurus exhibited - are more than enough to reconstruct what is needed.

Post by “Pacatus” of October 11, 2024 at 4:57 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

The writing is: “Epicurean Stability (eustatheia): A Philosophical Approach of Stress Management”, by Christos Yapijakis and George P. Chrousos, medical professionals teaching at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

Thank you, [Patrikios](#) . I found a PDF version of that essay here: <https://societyofepicurus.com/wp-content/upl...-Eustatheia.pdf>

Post by “Patrikios” of October 11, 2024 at 4:57 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In addition, however, there are major philosophical issues that Epicurus was addressing that tend to get crowded out if one focuses only on "balance" or "tranquility" or any other single tool toward the ultimate goal. I suppose one might say that it is important to take a "balanced" approach even to balance, and to recognize that there are many other day to day decisions that must be made on which Epicurus had very many important things to say.

From my reading of Yapijakis and Chrousos, this writing didn't just focus on 'psychosomatic balance', but broadly reinforces many of our core principles - the pursuit of inner peace, the importance of friendship, the value of rational thinking, and the focus on achievable, natural pleasures rather than vain desires. It provides a strong historical and philosophical foundation for our approach to stress management and the pursuit of happiness. Notice the importance of prudent, rational decision process. Here are some quotes from the article to highlight the 'balanced' approach.

*“According to Epicurus, eudaimonia is a hedonistic steady state of being (καταστηματική ἡδονή, static hedone) free of agitation and pain. The happy life could be achieved only by **prudent people**, who on the one hand do not have irrational fears of gods and death, while on the other hand recognize their irrational, unnatural and unnecessary desires and avoid them. People who want to live happily should exercise their practical wisdom to understand the nature of their emotions as criteria of truth, to allow the expression of the useful ones and to*

control that of the disruptive ones."

"According to *Epicurus*, *eustatheia* is achieved by controlling stress and the quality of life by means of prudence and other virtues, goodwill and friendship."

"Considering that philosophy is the cure for mental distress, Epicurus proposed specific philosophical "medicines" for achieving psychosomatic eustatheia and eudaimonia, which are timeless, as long as the biological nature of humans remains the same."

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2024 at 10:54 AM

This thread returns to my mind as I am completing editing of Episode 249.

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

the pursuit of inner peace, the importance of friendship, the value of rational thinking, and the focus on achievable, natural pleasures rather than vain desires. It provides a strong historical and philosophical foundation for our approach to stress management and the pursuit of happiness.

That quote is a pretty good summary of what people generally read about Epicurus. And it is very true, I think, as far as it goes. The ambiguity that I find of most concern when I talk to people (especially when the conversation includes emphasis on such things as "stress management") is often expressed something like:

"What does 'the pursuit of happiness' really mean in concrete terms for what I should do with my time today? Stop talking in platitudes, Epicurus! (... or Aristotle, or anyone else who talks about happiness or eudaemonia. Give me something concrete. Tell me how I myself should spend my own time to achieve "the greatest happiness" or "the greatest pleasure."

The reason this returns to mind in episode 249 is that one statement of Cotta is:

Quote

XXXVII. ... Epicurus truly, like indolent boys, thinks nothing preferable to idleness; yet those very boys, when they have a holiday, entertain themselves in some sportive exercise. But we are to suppose the Deity in such an inactive state that if he should move we may justly fear he would be no longer happy. This doctrine divests the Gods

of motion and operation; besides, it encourages men to be lazy, as they are by this taught to believe that the least labor is incompatible even with divine felicity.

This is essentially the charge that is also leveled against Epicurean ethics in general -- that "pleasure" (or any form of "happiness" linked to pleasure) is for the lazy and slothful, fit not as a goal for man, and certainly not fit as a goal for a god, and thus the entire Epicurean position is fit only for the lazy and worthless.

Talking about stress management and balance is all well and good for those who are primarily motivated by escape from pain. But the task at hand that Cicero doesn't allow Velleius to present, and Cicero allows Torquatus only to present briefly, is what kind of action is involved in this best life of pleasure and happiness.

Are we talking the pleasure of indolence, or the pleasures of pleasurable actions, and how do we explain the difference.

Cicero doesn't allow Torquatus or Velleius to say much like this following statement by Thomas Jefferson to William Short, but I think it's an example of how to point in the right direction.

[Quote from Thomas Jefferson Letter to William Short](#)

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.....

(I added this post also to the thread for [Episode 219](#).)

Post by "Pacatus" of November 21, 2024 at 2:03 PM

Here is a link to a PDF copy of the full Yapijakis and Chrousos article quoted by [Patrikios](#) above:

https://societyofepicurus.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Yapijakis-Chrousos_Epicurean-Eustatheia.pdf