

Epicurean Philosophy vs Charvaka / Lokayata

Post by “Julia” of January 15, 2025 at 6:38 AM

Hello everyone 😊

a good while ago, I came across the ancient Indian philosophy called Charvaka (Sanskrit: चार्वाक; IAST: Cārvāka), also known as Lokayata (Sanskrit: लोकायत; IAST: Lokāyata). Virtually everything I know about it is found [in this article](#), and it all sounds remarkably Epicurean to me. The academic writer [Ramkrishna Bhattacharya](#) has published two English language books on the subject, called [Studies on the Cārvāka / Lokāyata](#) and [More Studies on the Cārvāka / Lokāyata](#), but I haven't gotten around to reading them yet – and because my book stack and task list are exploding, I probably never will. So, I surrender, and ask y'all:

What do we know about *the differences* between Epicurean Philosophy and Charvaka / Lokayata?

Thank you! 😊

Post by “Don” of January 15, 2025 at 7:13 AM

You might be interested in this thread:

Post

[RE: 2022 Epicurus vs Buddhism Compare and Contrast Thread](#)

Of the ancient Indian philosophies of **Ājīvika**, **Ajñana**, **Buddhism**, **Chārvāka**, **Jainism**, **Mīmāṃsā**, **Nyāya**, **Samkhya**, **Vaisheshika**, **Vedanta**, and **Yoga**, we'll find the closest companion to Epicureanism in **Chārvāka**. Early Buddhism is most closely related to the Indian school of **Ajñana**, from which Pyrrhonism developed, so, in general, I don't think that comparisons between early Buddhism and Epicurean philosophy are helpful. They are dissimilar and historically unrelated.

In terms of physics, Epicureanism...

Eikadistes

January 27, 2022 at 10:02 PM

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2025 at 8:54 AM

Thanks to Don for pointing to that thread. We have several people who are particularly familiar with those philosophies and I seem to recall that Eikadistes' knowledge was particularly detailed.

Post by “Julia” of January 15, 2025 at 9:25 AM

I didn't expect anything on Charvaka in the threads on Buddhism! Here's the difference pointed out in the post Don has linked to:

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

Epicurean theology is comparatively unique. Epicurus would have been opposed to the atheism of Ājīvika, Chārvāka, Nyāya, and Vaisheshika, as well as the agnosticism of Ajñāna and Buddhism, as well as the immanent dualism and mysticism of Samkhya and Yoga, and also the divine idealism of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. The Jain universe of multiple, physical deities (the Tirthankaras), is the closest ancient Indian theology that in any way resembles Epicureanism. There is not, to my knowledge, any significant historical link between the two at any point in time.

Encouraged by that, I read chapters 10 and 11 of Bhattacharya's later book (*More Studies on ...*), titled "The Cārvāka / Lokāyata and Greek Materialism" and "Materialism: East and West", respectively. The congruence with Epicurean philosophy – even where the slandering by opposing schools and later scholars is concerned... – is astounding. I found just one more difference:

On page 110, Bhattacharya writes: "Both the Presocratic proto-materialist philosophers and the Cārvākas started from the premise of four elements as constituting the whole world." Later, on page 115, he expands: "The system betrays a very early origin, since it is firmly rooted in the concept of four basic elements (bhūtas, viz., earth, air, fire, and water)." Note that the Cārvākas did *not* consider these elements to be ideals or essences, but thought of them as matter, as constituents of reality as evidenced through the senses. It is my current understanding that some Cārvākas might very well have developed their physics into a more sophisticated system, especially when considering these and related materialist philosophical schools had a living tradition persisting for roughly 1750 of years! For example, while in the 8th century CE, the

Cārvākas were still speaking of four elements, two centuries later a related southern Indian school called Bhūtavāda expanded on those by adding the void as a fifth element (page 121/122 in *More Studies on ...*; translated from ancient Tamil as "space"). In the 12th century CE, they all mysteriously vanished.

Unfortunately, the Charvaka's core text as well as their extensions / explanations of it are lost, which means we might not find much more in terms of reasonably certain, reliable differences between their system and Epicurean philosophy...

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 15, 2025 at 9:30 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Thanks to Don for pointing to that thread. We have several people who are particularly familiar with those philosophies and I seem to recall that Eikadistes' knowledge was particularly detailed.

Indeed. 😊👍

[Quote from Julia](#)

What do we know about *the differences* between Epicurean Philosophy and Charvaka / Lokayata?

Hi, [Julia](#)!

One of the biggest differences we notes between the Epicurean Tradition and ancient Indian materialism is the tone: Epicurus recommended that we treat our neighbors with respect, whereas the writings of Charvaka are fairly critical and mocking. *I like it, personally...*

There is no world other than this;

There is no heaven and no hell;

The realm of Shiva and like regions,

are fabricated by stupid imposters. – Sarvasiddhanta Samgraha, Verse 7

Theologically, the Epicureans endorsed the existence of deities, whereas the Indian materialists saw them as being pure fictions of misinformed, human imaginations.

The philosophers of the Charvaka tradition also rejected atomism, whereas (interestingly) no less than two, orthodox branches of ancient pre-Hindu philosophy both proposed a form of

atomism (and Diogenes Laërtius reports that Democritus, himself, may have travelled to India to advance his education: "Some say that he associated with the Gymnosophists in India").

It is possible that Democritus borrowed atomism from the Vaisheshika tradition.

The Charvaka were physical pluralists, like Empedocles, so they divided the material world into elements, and associated atomism with orthodox, religious philosophy.

Nonetheless, we find many more similarities than differences. Both rejected the afterlife, both contextualized human existence as that of an animal, both saw the emergence of consciousness as a temporary phenomena that will burn out like a candle, both were materialists and hedonists who affirmed that pleasure is the positive goal in life.

An interesting point to note is the framing of Buddhism as the "Middle Way". Whereas Hindu eternalism is on one extreme, so Charvaka was recognized as being the opposite. Contrary to every orthodox philosophy (and a few heterodox), Charvaka also rejected karma and reincarnation.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 15, 2025 at 9:38 AM

[Quote from Julia](#)

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

There is not, to my knowledge, any significant historical link between the two at any point in time.

I need to correct myself here, because Democritus (according to Diogenes) may have travelled to India and learned from the "Gymnosophists". We aren't precisely sure *which* of the "Gymnosophists" he meant (I'm not sure that the Greeks realized there were a dozen, different, mutually-exclusive Indian philosophies). Pyrrho ran into them as well, but (I maintain) he met Ājīvika philosophers (ancient Indian skeptics). Nonetheless, Democritus' "Gymnosophists" could just as easily have been Vaisheshika atomists, or even Jains (whose theology he may have adopted).

Post by “Julia” of January 15, 2025 at 10:02 AM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

Theologically, the Epicureans endorsed the existence of deities, whereas the Indian materialists saw them as being pure fictions of misinformed, human imaginations.

Well...we have to take into account the dangers of "heresy" at the time, and also consider the complete re-definition of the word "gods" by Epicureans. When it comes down to it, don't Epicureans and Charvaka both think about the same of *supernatural* gods, gods in the sense of Zeus and Ganesh? I suppose that Charvaka rejected them more absolutely, whereas Epicurean philosophy remains open to the psychological/social usefulness of symbols and rituals?

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

One of the biggest differences we notes between the Epicurean Tradition and ancient Indian materialism is the tone: Epicurus recommended that we treat our neighbors with respect, whereas the writings of Charvaka are fairly critical and mocking.

Interesting! Thank you for pointing that out. I wonder how much of that was by free choice and how much was more of a necessity, more of a product of the region and times? I've gotten the impression ancient Indians didn't shy away from open, direct critique and mockery, even slander – then again, how much was provoked by whom? Did the Charvaka keep up that fighting, or did the others continue to bash them harshly?

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

The Charvaka were physical pluralists, like Empedocles, so they divided the material world into elements, and associated atomism with orthodox, religious philosophy.

Oh, I see. I suspected they just hadn't discovered atomism yet – thank you for pointing out they associated it with orthodox, religious philosophy! Given that, I shall withdraw my guess from post #4 that some might have improved on their core physics considerably. It now seems much less likely.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 15, 2025 at 10:54 AM

[Quote from Julia](#)

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

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Very true. Neither group tolerated supernatural propositions.

I think that Charvaka philosophers viewed the "religious experience" itself as a delusion and prayer as totally ineffective, whereas Epicureans saw the experience (as he describes early humans encountering inspiring visions in dream-states) as natural (as he did prayer), and of psychological value. I think the Charvaka opinion is a bit more like modern atheists.

Well, I guess that's one of the key points: *they were atheists*.

Post by "Julia" of January 15, 2025 at 11:14 AM

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Thank you! 👍 That is very helpful 😊