

# What place does "simple" have in Epicureanism?

**Post by "Kalosyni" of January 23, 2025 at 12:02 PM**

This morning as I was looking at a much needed cleaning project (needing to straighten up my house), it came to me that perhaps I have too much "stuff".

After listening to the [video presentation](#) by [Don](#) (and recall talked about the "simple" diet of most people living in ancient Greece), I was thinking about the definition of the word "simple", and found [this online dictionary entry](#).

So often self-help websites give out a recommendation to return to a simple lifestyle, as an antedote to the "too much" of modern life (too much noise, too much traffic, too much commotion, too much stuff).

And yet, it seems this is an individual issue, as it is really about what feels right for each person - Epicurean philosophy says to pay attention to what feels pleasant and pleasurable. So some people may not need "simplicity".

What stuck out for me from the dictionary entry of the word "simple"...was the definition: ordinary. (Don may have talked about the word ordinary in his presentation, I'll need to re-watch it).

And I think we can end up cognating words in slightly different ways (as sometimes the word "simple" can be applied to a lack of intelligence, which gives it a negative connotation).

Another meaning is: easy ...(which does echo that what is necessary is easy to get).

I wanted to start this thread to discuss:

What place does "simple" have in Epicureanism?

So feel free to share your thoughts 😊

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**Post by "Bryan" of January 23, 2025 at 1:21 PM**

I will throw this in:

"For the one who is accomplished, this is the most important thing produced by total accuracy: to be able to quickly use one's attention with each thing referenced by simple component principles and statements"

-- Epikouros D.L. 10.36b

The "the one who is accomplished," that is, a student who has gone through all the material is a fun word: ὁ τετελειουργημένος, "te-te-le-si-our-gē-me-nos" (or tetelesiourgēmēnē for a woman).

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## Post by "Cassius" of January 23, 2025 at 2:04 PM

Good point as to the context of the statement in the letter to Herodotus. The word "simple" has a huge number of connotations and it would be good (as stated in the first post) to flesh out which ones are and are not relevant to Epicurus. I think a lot of people tend to associate the word first and foremost with something rhyming with ascetic, but that's not at all the only option. [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)

## adjective

### ***simpler, simplest.***

1. easy to understand, deal with, use, etc.: simple tools.

*a simple matter;*

*simple tools.*

**Synonyms:** [lucid](#), [unmistakable](#), [understandable](#), [intelligible](#), [clear](#)

2. not elaborate or artificial; [plain](#):

*a simple style.*

**Synonyms:** [unembellished](#), [neat](#), [natural](#)

3. not ornate or luxurious; unadorned:

*a simple gown.*

4. [unaffected](#); [unassuming](#); [modest](#):

*a simple manner.*

5. not complicated:

*a simple design.*

6. not complex or compound; [single](#)

7. occurring or considered alone; [mere](#); [bare](#):

*the simple truth;*

*a simple fact.*

8. free of deceit or guile; [sincere](#); [unconditional](#):

*a frank, simple answer.*

**Synonyms:** [ingenuous](#), [guileless](#), [artless](#)

9. common or ordinary:

*a simple soldier.*

10. not grand or sophisticated; [unpretentious](#):

*a simple way of life.*

11. humble or lowly:

*simple folk.*

12. inconsequential or rudimentary.

**Synonyms:** [unnecessary](#), [nonessential](#), [trivial](#), [trifling](#)

13. [unlearned](#); [ignorant](#).

**Synonyms:** [stupid](#), [untutored](#)

14. lacking mental acuteness or sense:

*a simple way of thinking.*

15. [unsophisticated](#); [naive](#); [credulous](#).

16. [simpleminded](#).

17. *Chemistry*.

1. composed of only one substance or element:

*a simple substance.*

2. not mixed.

18. *Botany*. not divided into parts: a simple stem.

*a simple leaf;*

*a simple stem.*

19. *Zoology*. not compound:

*a simple ascidian.*

20. *Music*. uncompounded or without overtones; single:

*simple tone.*

21. *Grammar*. having only the head without modifying elements included: Compare [complete \( def 5 \)](#).

*The simple subject of "The dappled pony gazed over the fence" is "pony."*

22. (of a verb tense) consisting of a main verb with no auxiliaries, as *takes* (simple present) or *stood* (simple past) ( [compound](#) ).

23. *Mathematics*. [linear \( def 8 \)](#).

24. *Optics*. (of a lens) having two optical surfaces only.

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## Post by "Don" of January 23, 2025 at 2:29 PM

He's the section from my recent talk:

Did the Epicureans follow a simple, plain, frugal lifestyle? Yes, from all descriptions they appeared to live a simple, plain, frugal lifestyle... NOT unlike other average ancient Greeks of the time. Not "spartan," not "ascetic," not a life of self-denial! Simple, plain, frugal. Frugal doesn't mean self-denial.

Words and phrases along these lines often associated with the school were:

Simplici victu = They led a simple, plain way of life

οἱ τε λιτοὶ χυλοὶ = They had simple, inexpensive, frugal flavors and tastes

Καλιάδα = a simple cottage (Philodemus' description of his apartments in the lavish estate of Piso)

εὐτελέστατα καὶ λιτότατα διαιτώμενοι = lead one's life in a manner that was easily paid for and simple, inexpensive, and frugal.

To me, this doesn't sound like self-denial or asceticism. It sounds like common sense! It sounds like Epicurus is reminding people to live within their means!

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## Post by "Al-Hakiim von Grof" of January 23, 2025 at 4:57 PM

Having just finished Dewitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy", the following idea is fresh on my mind:

"Moreover, it was Epicurus who specifically declared that a laborious life was inconsistent with the perfect bliss of the gods..." - dewitt, pg.53

And:

"This notion was so well known as to have been familiar to the dull Horatian commentator Porphyry, who lived early in the third century A.D. Horace had quoted freely from Lucretius: 'I have learned the lesson that the gods live a life free from concern.' 60 The comment runs: 'This derives from the doctrine of the Epicureans, who assert that the gods cannot be immortal unless enjoying leisure and immune from all responsibility.'"

To me, this is the *spirit* of "the simple life"; avoidance of that which one finds excessively laborious. The simple life is one in which prudent planning ensures your needs are met, your health of mind and body is maintained, and pleasures abound, all with only exactly as much effort as is required and no more.

To me, it's the opposite of the "rat race" of modern society. The gluttonous levels of consumerism, the social posturing with large houses, expensive vehicles, and wildly expensive lifestyles that require constant upkeep and 80 hour work weeks.

"Simplicity" is a call to figuring out what truly pleases you, avoiding the all too common "hamster wheel" of life, and realizing that most of the greatest pleasures of being a human on earth don't require much effort to obtain.

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## Post by "Patrikios" of January 29, 2025 at 6:41 PM

### [Quote from Al-Hakiim von Grof](#)

To me, this is the spirit of "**the simple life**"; avoidance of that which one finds excessively laborious. The simple life is one in which **prudent planning** ensures your needs are met, your health of mind and body is maintained, and pleasures abound, all with only exactly as much effort as is required and no more.

[Al-Hakiim von Grof](#) RE: "a **laborious life** was inconsistent with the perfect bliss of the gods"

Thanks for that clarification to avoid "excessively laborious" actions. Certainly, we should labor to meet the simple daily needs for ourselves and our family. We can find pleasure in laborious tasks that build something beautiful that gives ongoing pleasure to us or to friends and families, or local community. I fully agree with your definition of "the simple life". For me that definition of "**the simple life**", is one where these "simple" actions or avoidance of actions leads to a **balanced/stable & fulfilling life** (*eustatheia* & *eudaimonia*).

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## Post by "Adrastus" of July 4, 2025 at 11:47 AM

For me, simplicity in terms of food, travel and things is more about savoring a pleasure, and not growing disgusted by or otherwise ruining a pleasure; and this is another way of saying that I am using the Canon. I take this approach because I live with a nuclear family as well as interesting friends coming and going, and *giving a bit too much stuff at times*, that I cannot necessarily live my life in accordance with any one particular vision and there is always an on going discourse... or unfortunately boundary-defining argument.

All simplistic hedonic arguments go out the window once you've actually lived many an

hedonically 'gross' situation. Like, for example, have you ever literally always had a birthday cake at the ready? Try being a social parent who tries to mingle with other parents and show up to every kids' birthday party. It's a constant stream of cake and ice cream, and throw in the cultural holidays and my wife's penchant for wanting to get a bit of treat now and then for the kids on a weekend or any other special occasion. Constant cake will destroy whatever love of the stuff on the rarer occasion you used to get cake or any other sweets. You feel repulsed by it, and I imagine if we listened to our bodies more, we would be repulsed by a lot of things that are decadently "pleasurable" due to over exposure rather than some sort of moral quandry. Kinda like someone working at a chocolate factory for too long will absolutely be disgusted by chocolate.

I come to unfortunately subtly resent opportunities to get free food or items or really much of anything, because I want to continue to appreciate and like things that I could continue to appreciate, and like if there weren't always in such ready supply or unwittingly thrust upon me. More often getting "free" things becomes a felt loss of some sense of pleasure in the food in question or devalues items generally. There is probably some science to this but I think it is a bit better to perceive "consumption" as a form of artful interaction with the pleasures and ideations that food and items give us that just ideas of "simplicity" or "moderation" cannot capture, but needs to be Canonically reasoned through. But yes, I cling to the idea of 'simplicity' and 'minimalism' and convey it in that way when I am surrounded by fun and amiable people that are more into achieving ideas of 'maximizing'; but nothing gets this idea across to them more easily than to talk about how all this stuff they bring into my life makes me *feel* badly.

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## Post by “Don” of July 4, 2025 at 12:03 PM

### [Quote from Adrastus](#)

about savoring a pleasure, and not growing disgusted by or otherwise ruining a pleasure

VS35. Don't ruin the things you have by wanting what you don't have, but realize that they too are things you once did wish for. οὐ δεῖ λυμαίνεσθαι τὰ παρόντα τῶν ἀπόντων ἐπιθυμία, ἀλλ' ἐπιλογίζεσθαι ὅτι καὶ ταῦτα τῶν εὐκταίων ἦν.

The word translated here as "ruin" (λυμαίνομαι) means, at root, to mistreat. The implication is that not honoring the good things you have achieved is a sign of disrespect and shows a lack of appreciation.

~ Saint-Andre, <https://monadnock.net/epicurus/vatican-sayings.html#n35>

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### **Post by “Adrastus” of July 4, 2025 at 12:44 PM**

Thanks so much Don, for diving in to the texts! So much more illuminating to work with the original language.

I'll just add one final thought about my relationship to travel. I love the passage in Book 3 of Lucretius on the travel of the disturbed people who go from their house to the city and back, or off to the country and never finding what they are after or being satisfied anywhere. The passage ultimately ends with a notion of fearing death, but not feeling such pull as I did pre-Epicurean Philosophy, I feel like a lot of my desire to travel could be solved by an attitude of "more is less"; meaning, more cultivating in my every day life would mean less effort and time spent thinking about travel or actually traveling. I write, philosophize and otherwise communicate on the internet for the same reasons I travel, which is to try to experience certain things I do not get in my normal surroundings. Namely a sense of community, comraderie and connectedness, but I could experience these things perhaps if I complicated my life a bit by trying to produce or reproduce those experiences in my life more with people around me I know or could get to know. 😊

Cheers!

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of July 4, 2025 at 1:58 PM**

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

So often self-help websites give out a recommendation to return to a simple lifestyle, as an antedote to the "too much" of modern life (too much noise, too much traffic, too much commotion, too much stuff).

And yet, it seems this is an individual issue, as it is really about what feels right for each person - Epicurean philosophy says to pay attention to what feels pleasant and pleasurable. So some people may not need "simplicity".

What brings pleasure and what brings pain, can be different for different people. For example as [Adrastus](#) mentioned birthday cake above, and I often find that the idea is more pleasurable than the experience, and that is because many people think that it needs to be a certain level of sweetness (ie very sweet). But for myself I find that the best cakes are less sweet AND they are homemade with quality ingredients - and there is nothing "simple" about a well-made homemade cake! 😊...and well-made homemade chocolate cake, yum!...doesn't come about for me too often, so I really enjoy it when I have it.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of July 4, 2025 at 2:08 PM**

#### [Quote from Adrastus](#)

I come to unfortunately subtly resent opportunities to get free food or items or really much of anything, because I want to continue to appreciate and like things that I could continue to appreciate, and like if there weren't always in such ready supply or unwittingly thrust upon me. More often getting "free" things becomes a felt loss of some sense of pleasure in the food in question or devalues items generally

This brings up the idea regarding the necessity to develop positive attitudes and then eventually habits in relation to things, and spurs on some further thoughts... going further with VS35 which Don quoted above...my own attitude for "free" things is "wow, it just happened by chance that I was in the right place at the right time, and this really good thing happened, and I think "how lucky I am!" and then savor things AND file the experience away as a happy memory to reflect upon. And yet, thinking further I also did something to increase my chances to experience something pleasurable...I had my eyes open for opportunities and I took certain actions...and basically I am seeking to add pleasure into my life.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of July 6, 2025 at 7:41 AM**

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

This brings up the idea regarding the necessity to develop positive attitudes and then eventually habits in relation to things

I'm not sure if there is anything directly talking about having (or how to have) a positive attitude within Epicurean philosophy, but I want to recommend a book that I found to be very good: "Positivity" by Barbara Fredrickson, and which has science-backed research and a practical take on it, such as how to be positive in the face of difficult situations.

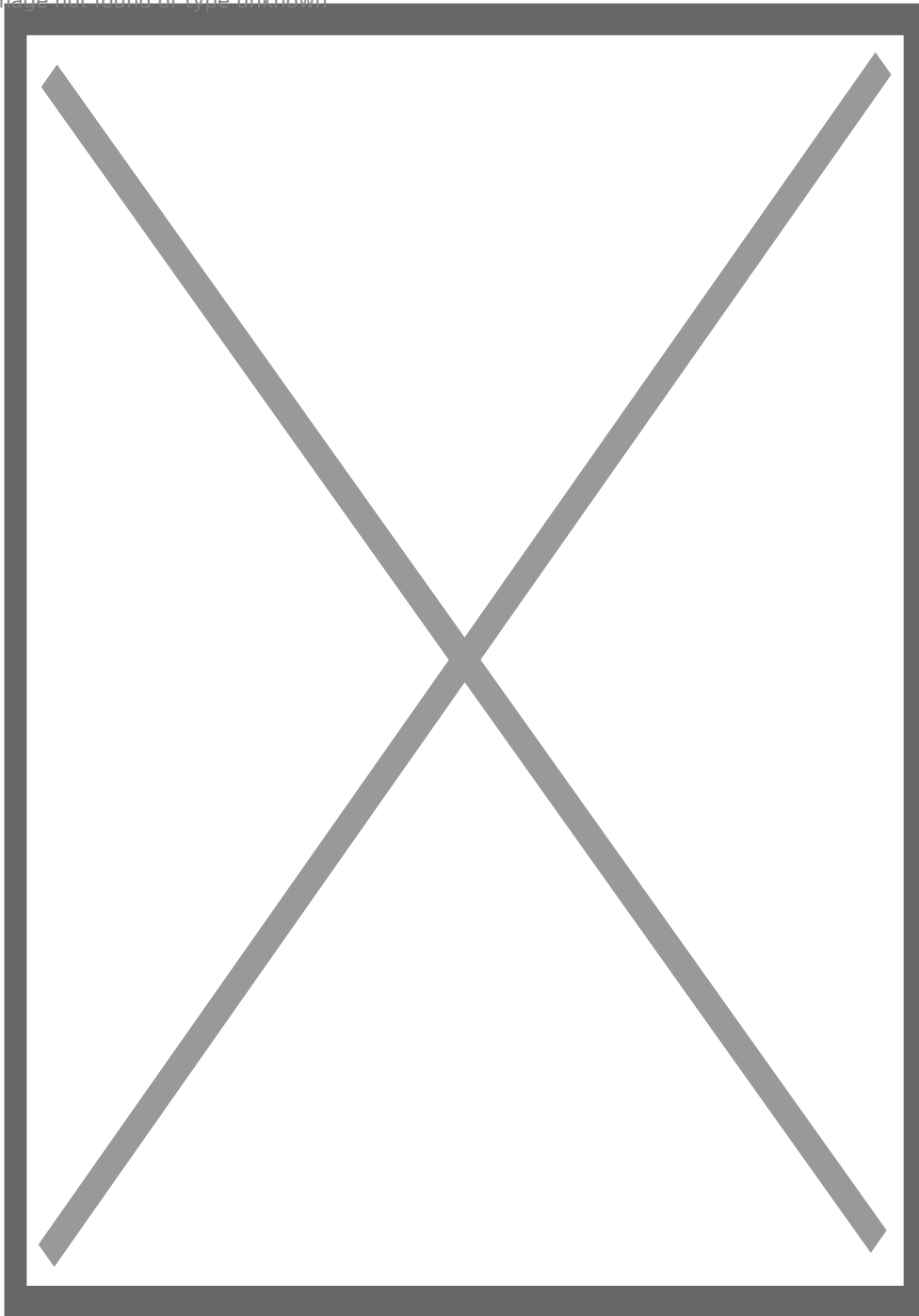
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### **Post by "Don" of July 6, 2025 at 8:01 AM**

I would say Epicurus' and the school's general advocacy of cultivating gratitude comes close to a modern idea of positivity.

However, don't be lured into the trap of toxic positivity either:

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[Toxic positivity - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toxic_positivity)  
en.wikipedia.org

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**Post by "Cassius" of July 6, 2025 at 8:05 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4259-what-place-does-simple-have-in-epicureanism/>

That term toxic positivity deserves a ☹️ but no doubt the problem is real - or a LACK of being real.

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### **Post by “Adrastus” of July 6, 2025 at 9:41 AM**

I think for me at least the difference between Toxic Positivity and whatever we may deem as healthy, is having methods to be comfortable and ultimately resolve any painful, unpleasant or relationship altering feelings. Still though, happiness is a choice we are making even knowing at least a fair amount of what the world gets up to by choosing to resolve, or at least seek to resolve, emotional and psychic tensions; as opposed to my experiences with resignation to despair and the tug towards oblivion which others certainly experience. It's a lot harder for me to be in relationship, excel at work, parent the children exceptionally, not go on ceaseless benders and so forth; without a bit of cocksure confidence, being silly, a bit of revelry and ultimately giving less of my cares to tragedies and impending doom, even when acknowledging the logical implication that I am saying people ought to care less about me and mine as some mere strangers, or outliers.