

Immutability of Epicurean school in ancient times

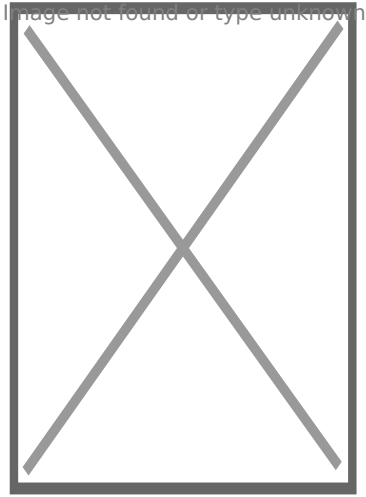
Post by “TauPhi” of July 28, 2025 at 8:44 PM

I came across this observation from Numenius of Apamea who wrote the passage some 500 years after Epicurus and I thought it may be interesting topic for us to discuss. Epicurean school in antiquity was uniquely resistant to any change or innovation. When other schools went through distinct periods in their development - Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, Early Stoa, Middle Stoa, 1st Academy, 2nd Academy, umpteen academy etc. - Epicureanism had never developed. No new ideas were introduced, nothing was really questioned or corrected, there were around 10 scholars in succession that we know of who run the school and yet no-one really deviated or influenced in any significant way the teachings of the school.

So what do you think? Why was Epicurean school like a tardigrade in a state of cryptobiosis? Was the school's stagnation a feature or a bug?

Quote

On the contrary, there was no great necessity that the Epicureans should have preserved the teachings of their master so scrupulously; but they understood them, and it was evident that they taught nothing that diverged from the doctrines of Epicurus in any point. They agreed that he was the true Wise-man, remained unanimously with him, and therefore were fully justified in bearing his name. Even among the later Epicureans it was an understood thing, that they should contradict neither each other nor Epicurus in any material point, and they consider it an infamous piece of outlawry; it is forbidden to promote any innovation. Consequently, none of them dared such a thing, and those teachings have always remained unchanged, because they were always unanimous. The School of Epicurus is like a properly administered state in which there are no parties who have the same thoughts and opinions; hence, they were genuine successors, and apparently, will ever remain such.



[Numenius Of Apamea : Guthrie, Kenneth. Sylvan. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

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Post by “Cassius” of July 28, 2025 at 9:19 PM

1. A feature. And remaining true to correct insights is not "stagnation." There is no revising core doctrines such as "there are no supernatural gods" or "there is no life after death." "Ideal forms do not exist" -- etc. There's either agreement that they are correct or start a new school with different views.

2. I have no doubt that new arguments were introduced over time to deal with new arguments from the opposing schools. But when you have the fundamentals correct from the start, there's no need to revise them, and any customization to meet new arguments from opponents does nothing to undercut the original core.

Post by “Joshua” of July 29, 2025 at 2:41 AM

I think part of the reason Epicureanism remained unchanged is because it treated with clear finality certain of its basic premises, and it did so in a way that rendered any further dispute

rather pointless among those that accepted the premise. Consider such premises as *there is no life after death*, and *Nature was not created, but has always existed*.

Any school of philosophy proposing that there is life after death has not ended a dispute but begun one; what is the afterlife like? Is it eternal or finite? Is it the same for everyone, or will people experience different afterlives depending on their respective portions of fame, virtue, nobility, or piety? How long does the soul linger in the body, and where does it go after? Is there any hope of return from the afterlife? Can people still living contact those who are dead, and vice versa?

Christianity has shattered into a million tiny fragments over questions like these, but for the Epicurean every one of these points of argument is utterly meaningless. There is no life after death, so there's no point in speculating about what that non-existent 'life' might be like. Such speculations, which are not even of academic interest, will certainly never have the power to bring about schism, or mutual recrimination, or factional infighting. And quite a lot of Epicurean philosophy is like that; once you accept the premise that nature was not created by a god, or that the substrate of everything that exists in nature is mere matter, or that the senses are fundamentally reliable, you slam the door shut forever on all of the speculation that does not take its point of departure from that premise.

When we examine the things that did change and develop in ancient Epicureanism, they are quite minor. Epicurus preferred to transmit his ideas in uninterrupted discourse and in plain dress, but that did not prevent Lucretius from casting them in verse, or Lucian from engaging with them in dialectic.

Post by “Cassius” of July 29, 2025 at 7:52 AM

I scanned over the opening pages of the Numenius material and there's a lot of good information there, with the Epicureans coming off very well in comparison to the schisms of the other schools, the problems and schisms of which inevitably arise from the notorious teachings of forms of skepticism:

Quote

I. Why the Successors of Plato diverged from Him.

1. Under Speusippus, Plato's nephew, and Xenocrates, his successor, and Polemo, who took over the school from Xenocrates, the character of the teachings remained almost the same, because the notorious teaching of the “reserve of judgment” and the like,

did not yet exist.

I see also this article. Numenius is a Platonist and therefore a mystic, but at least he seems to have understood the problems with skepticism.

[Numenius \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Quote

Numenius' best attested work is his treatise *On the Dissension of the Academics from Plato* (frs. 24–28 Des Places, also in Reinhardt 2023). Eusebius in his *Preparatio Evangelica* (*Preparation for the Gospel*) has excerpted five long pieces from it (in book XIV). The reason why Eusebius quotes so extensively from this work of Numenius is in order to substantiate his claim, which permeates the entire *Preparatio Evangelica*, that ancient philosophers were in disagreement with each other. He takes that feature to indicate the inability of pagan philosophy to reach the truth (on Eusebius' reading of Numenius see des Places 1975, Jourdan 2015). This is an originally skeptic argument, that is employed by Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics alike, to the effect that dogmatic philosophy amounts to failure because of the disagreements occurring in it (Cicero, *Academica* II.115, Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* II.11). Eusebius has a special kind of disagreement in mind, namely that with Plato's philosophy, which he considers to have come closer to the truth than any other pagan philosophy, that is, in his view, to Christian doctrine (*Praep. Ev.* XI.pref. 2–3, XI.8.1, XIII.4.3). Numenius' testimony in this work fits well an argument like that of Eusebius. For Numenius criticizes in this work the departure of the skeptical Academics from what he considers to be Plato's central doctrine, namely, the doctrine of first principles of reality that Numenius finds adumbrated in the 2nd *Letter* attributed to Plato (fr. 24.51–6). For Numenius it is primarily the disagreement of the Academic skeptics with Plato's allegedly dogmatic philosophy that marks a failure.

Post by “Sam_Qwerty” of July 29, 2025 at 8:01 AM

The scientific method really didn't exist back then. And they only had very basic scientific equipment. So they had no way to test these ideas. Nevertheless, from what I've read, they were not wrong in their premises, modern science simply is more refined.

Post by “Cassius” of July 29, 2025 at 8:15 AM

[Quote from Sam Qwerty](#)

The scientific method really didn't exist back then. And they only had very basic scientific equipment. So they had no way to test these ideas. Nevertheless, from what I've read, they were not wrong in their premises, modern science simply is more refined.

I understand I think why you say that, and in this context I would say it's important to distinguish between a philosophy and an applied science. Yes, applied sciences are likely always going to discover new details in their fields of expertise, but that doesn't mean that the general approach (that logical reasoning based on observations leads to the conclusion that the universe is natural and has no mystical forces over it, for example) will ever require revision.

I am a major proponent and fan of "modern science, " but "modern science" will never replace philosophy, and they ought not to be considered to be in competition. There will always be "unknowns" beyond the current reach of the science of the moment, and it will always be necessary to take philosophic positions about how to deal with those circumstances.

Post by “Sam_Qwerty” of July 29, 2025 at 8:31 AM

So Epicureanism would be more in competition with let's say, secular humanism. I haven't really looked into either one. Although when I look back on my life, I have always done what I enjoyed.

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 29, 2025 at 8:33 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

I came across this observation from Numenius of Apamea who wrote the passage some 500 years after Epicurus and I thought it may be interesting topic for us to discuss.

Epicurean school in antiquity was uniquely resistant to any change or innovation. When other schools went through distinct periods in their development - Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, Early Stoa, Middle Stoa, 1st Academy, 2nd Academy, umpteen academy etc. - Epicureanism had never developed. No new ideas were introduced, nothing was really questioned or corrected, there were around 10 scholars in succession that we know of who run the school and yet no-one really deviated or influenced in any significant way the teachings of the school.

Both Cassius and Joshua have given very good posts above to address this critique of the Epicurean school, given by the Platonist Numenius.

It is actually an indication of the strength of the school that it didn't shift in its basic tenets.

Just because we don't have anyone labeling any different time periods, doesn't mean that there weren't some subtle differences over time.

I would venture to say that there could likely be seen some differences between the "Early Epicureans" and the "Philodemus Epicureans" - a stronger emphasis on physics and canonicity in the early time vs. a stronger emphasis on ethics by Philodemus. Perhaps [Bryan](#) might have something to say?

Post by "Cassius" of July 29, 2025 at 8:49 AM

[Quote from Sam Qwerty](#)

So Epicureanism would be more in competition with let's say, secular humanism.

I think that's the right direction, but I wouldn't call secular humanism a true philosophy of its own - it seems to me that most people think of secular humanism as more of a general attitude endorsing particular types of morality. The question of what "secular humanism" is is a very deep subject in itself.

Post by "Eikadistes" of July 29, 2025 at 9:59 AM

I think that *parrhesia* has a bit to do with it, too.

When your school sticks to frank speech, it becomes much more difficult to seduce with metaphor. Otherwise, when you use metaphor as the primary means of instruction (*I'm looking at you and your fables, Jesus*), then you **guarantee** that your teachings will be forever misunderstood.

If Epicurean philosophy weren't doctrinally "conservative" (in the sense of defending the original program), then I believe the Catholic Church would have re-purposed it by now. 😜



PRE-CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS AND PATHFINDERS OF THE WAY



“In EPICURUS ... there was nothing of that compromising, dialectical spirit that pervaded Aristotle and the others and allowed them to be

Post by “kochiekoch” of July 29, 2025 at 2:00 PM

Bertrand Russel didn't like Epicureanism's "conservatism" too. Not progressive enough for him.



I think the school stuck to its principles because they worked. You ended up with Early Platonism, Middle Platonism and Neo Platonism because there were always mystical leaders reinterpreting, according to their individual visions, what the philosophy was, in order to make it fit the challenges of the times. Same thing with the Stoics and Academics.

And how did these philosophies work out for the non-Epicureans? How did Cicero's denial of grief, which the subject of the latest podcast, work out for him? Not well considering he went out on a campaign that got him killed soon after he wrote his Disputations.

There is no way, if Epicureanism was impractical, it would have survived intact for centuries. It's the only philosophy or ideology I know of that has.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 29, 2025 at 2:14 PM

Here's a fun example, *for anyone unaware; this tickled my mind* - **Lucifer**.

In the beginning, we weren't sure that Venus was one *thing*, we saw it as (maybe) two, the Morning Star and the Evening Star. In Latin, one of those objects names was "Lucifer." It was *literally just* the name of a celestial object ([Phosphoros](#) in Greek, among a handful of other proper names).

There are a few ancient Hebrew (i.e. Canaanite) myths that associate the planet Venus with a god who attempted to usurp a supreme god's throne and became an underworld deity. As far as I knew, this isn't reflected in mainstream branches of Judaism; this is a relic of their days as polytheists.

Nonetheless, Latin Christians sure got a kick out of it, and incorporated that narrative into their mythos. To my knowledge, *however*, **they did not make a association between "Lucifer" and "Satan"**. Those were two, separate mythical figures for hundreds of years of early Christianity.

I don't believe this association was popularized until Dante's fiction. Therein, the "Lucifer" we think of as the prideful pretty-boy who fell from heaven and took over a spicy underworld comes from medieval, Italian fiction. It has little to do with the myths of ancient Christianity.

I like to think of it like high school teachers. English teachers and History teachers both include Julius Caesar in their curriculum. English teachers (often, in my experience) base their understanding of Roman history on Shakespeare. History teachers base it off of Cicero, etc.

Unless you go to the source, it's some level of fan-fiction.

(Check me on some of those claims; I'm over-generalizing a bit, I know).

Post by “TauPhi” of September 9, 2025 at 10:25 PM

David Sedley's article closely related to the topic of this thread:

EPICUREAN THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE FROM HERMARCHUS TO LUCRETIUS AND PHILODEMUS

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to trace the development of Epicurean epistemology from the death of Epicurus in 270 BCE to the latter part of the first century BCE. The story gains interest from the fact that these Epicureans were, as would be expected, scrupulously loyal to the doctrines of their founder as they interpreted these, but at the same time found themselves obliged to elaborate and strengthen the inferential methodology he had bequeathed, initially in order to resist the sceptical critiques of the New Academy, and later in order to justify their school's empiricism in opposition to the rationalistic Stoic theory of inferential validity. The protagonists are Colotes, Polystratus, Timasagoras, Zeno of Sidon, Philodemus and Lucretius, with Cicero an important witness.

Full article can be found here:

[View of Epicurean theories of knowledge from Hermarchus to Lucretius and Philodemus](#)

Post by “Cassius” of September 10, 2025 at 6:39 AM

Thank you Tau Phi! If you (or anyone) finds a like to the work by "Verde" referenced in the first sentence of that paper please post it too. So far I find only a work that is later than Sedley's article and therefore cannot be the right link. These look like very useful articles.

Post by “Don” of September 10, 2025 at 7:04 AM

The Verde article is this one:

[Ancora sullo statuto veritativo della sensazione in Epicuro | Lexicon Philosophicum: International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas](#)

When Sedley writes "above" he literally means above in the same issue. Verde's directly precedes him in that issue:

[2018: Special Issue - Hellenistic Theories of Knowledge | Lexicon Philosophicum: International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas](#)

Post by “Cassius” of September 10, 2025 at 7:08 AM

Thank you Don! Here's a direct link to the full issue - "Hellenistic Theories of Knowledge" which has both articles:

[View of 2018: Special Issue - Hellenistic Theories of Knowledge](#)

Unfortunately for us the Verde article is in Italian, but it has this English abstract:

ABSTRACT: The main goals of this article are, on the one hand, to show the peculiar features of the Epicurean view of sense-perception (aisthesis), the first criterion of truth of Epicurus' canon; and, on the other hand, to critically discuss a recent contribution by Alexander Bown ("Epicurus on Truth and Falsehood", *Phronesis*, 61 (4), 2016, p. 463-503), which deals with Epicurus' double notion of truth (i.e. the truth of sense-perceptions/aisthesis and the truth of opinions/hypolepseis). Besides Book 10 of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* and Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus*, columns LXXII-LXXIII of PHerc. 1012 (including a work by the Epicurean philosopher Demetrius Lacon) and a passage from Sextus Empiricus' *Against the Logicians* (M, VIII,9) will be examined in order to explain the meaning of truth linked by Epicurus to perceptible objects (aistheta)