

Beyond Stoicism (2025)

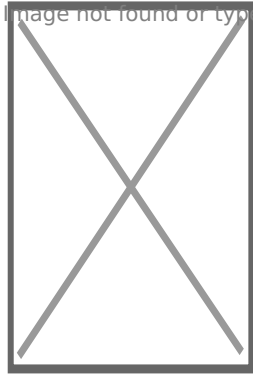
Post by "Don" of August 12, 2025 at 5:54 AM

Beyond Stoicism: A Guide to the Good Life with Stoics, Sceptics, Epicureans, and Other Ancient Philosophers

By Massimo Pigliucci, Gregory Lopez, Meredith Alexander Kunz · 2025

(Preview)

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[Beyond Stoicism](#)

books.google.com

Same old, same old regurgitated nonsense regarding the Garden. "Beautiful obscurity"





Chapter 2

AVOID PAIN AND STRESS WITH EPICURUS

*Don't fear god,
Don't worry about death;
What is good is easy to get, and
What is terrible is easy to endure.*

—Philodemus, from the Herculaneum Papyrus

It was a warm spring morning at the Garden, a property near the Dipylon gate, just outside Athens. The sun filtered through the branches of tall oak trees and dappled the fig, almond, and apple groves watered by streams from the Eridanus River. Bees buzzed around flowering shrubs. In the courtyard, the Garden's inhabitants were setting up their simple breakfast. Bread with olive oil, barley-meal, and pitchers of water graced the tables.¹

Epicurus, the Garden's founder, took his place. A middle-aged man dressed in a simple cloak and leather sandals, he had a full, curly beard, a long nose, and a warm but serious gaze. "Another beautiful day living in beautiful obscurity," he said, prompting smiles and gentle laughter from those gathering for the meal. He scanned the benches, now filling up with his closest friends, people he had welcomed to join the Garden's experiment in group living.

"Good morning, friends," Epicurus continued, nodding to those sitting around him. "Remember this day as all days: Friendship reminds all of us to wake up to happiness! And now, let's eat. Our simple meal will relieve our hunger and thirst, and our conversation will lighten our souls."

Astonishingly, the friends who broke bread together under the cypresses were not exclusively high-born Athenians but included women and former slaves. Epicurus made a point to admit women to the Garden not as a rare exception but as a general principle. His was the first Greek philosophical school to do so. Even women who had been courtesans were welcomed by Epicurus, including his friend Leontion,² along with many other students and companions, such as Epicurus's favorite servant, Mvs ("Mouse").³

have now been lost), and received by them alongside his closest friends. That's what the Garden was all about.

At the Garden, no one talked about politics, business, or the gods. It was a place of serenity and escape in a time when the wars among Alexander's successors raged on for decades. The later Roman writer and politician Seneca tells us that Epicurus's Garden had this motto carved on the front gate: "Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure."⁸

This doesn't mean that the Garden-dwellers caroused in gluttonous feasts. Epicurus said a pot of cheese would be his biggest luxury, and he advocated for a down-to-earth yet pleasurable existence. Instead of rich, expensive foods, Epicurus and his friends enjoyed cheese and bread. Rather than racing around acquiring the latest fashions, they relied on basic tunics and cloaks. Instead of debating the most recent war, they spoke calmly about the nature of the cosmos. Rather than engaging in frequent sexual relationships and marriage, they cultivated close friendships and deep conversations. Their late-night philosophy seminars were legendary.²

At the Garden, Epicurus remained cheerful and kept sharing his ideas until the end, even when riven with pain from ailments, including kidney stones, that slowly destroyed his health. True to his ideas, he was unafraid of death and passed away calmly in his bathtub, surrounded by friends, in 270 BCE.¹⁰

For generations to follow in the Greek and Roman world, Epicurus was celebrated as the *heros ktistes* ("founding hero") of the Garden, with commemorations held in his honor during his birthday month.¹¹ Bronze statues were erected in his memory, and several of his followers named their children Epicurus. As the ancient biographer Diogenes Laërtius put it, Epicurus's friends were "so numerous they could not be measured by entire cities," and "all who knew him [were] captivated by the siren spells of his doctrines."¹²

Sophisticated hedonism

Contrary to what you may have heard, Epicureanism is *not* the philosophy of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, though this misconception has been around for a while—ever since the time of Epicurus, in fact! There is even some doubt that Epicureanism qualifies as a hedonistic—that is, pleasure-seeking—philosophy. For Epicurus, the highest "pleasure" is lack of pain, something that would have hardly satisfied the Cyrenaics (see [chapter 1](#)), who most certainly *were* hedonists.

Rather, Epicureanism is about reaching two goals in life: *aponia* and *ataraxia*. The first means that you are in no physical distress at all. We reach *aponia* when we are not thirsty or hungry, nor lacking anything else that the human body requires. *Ataraxia* means tranquility of mind, which is achieved when we no longer have fears, unfulfilled desires, or any of the mental states that otherwise disturb us. You may be inclined to think that there is more to life than not being hungry or fearful, but Epicurus would beg to differ, and he put forth some pretty good reasons that are worth entertaining.

The basic Epicurean argument in favor of finding pleasure and avoiding pain is simple; that's what Nature very clearly tells us. Think about human infants and how they behave. At bottom, they are drawn to comfort and withdraw from unpleasantness. And who are we, say the Epicureans, to think we can do better than Nature itself?

Epicurean philosophy identifies three kinds of desires: natural and necessary, natural but not necessary, and unnatural and unnecessary. The first category is satisfied by things like the acquisition of clothing, shelter, food, and water. The desire we have for these things is natural, meaning that we seek them instinctively, without having to justify why or think too much about it. This desire is also necessary, because without clothes, shelter, food, and water we'd be dead or lead a very uncomfortable life. The good news is that such needs are also easy to satisfy, all things considered.

The second category—desires that are natural but not necessary—is in a sense an elaboration of the first group. Consider things such as designer clothes, gourmet meals, fancy wine, and a large house. Desiring

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2025 at 6:09 AM

If you go to the Google link, you can click the link in the table of contents to the Epicurean section. The "living like an Epicurean" is teeth-clenchingly bad 🤢🤡

Post by “Cassius” of August 12, 2025 at 7:34 AM

Well thank you for starting my day with a reminder of all that is wrong with modern Epicurean philosophy! 😊

I will check out the background of what you posted there and have much more to say.

But first I will say:

For those of us who have read extensively into the background of what the texts really say, we can grit our teeth and remember that ataraxia and aponia in now way exclude the active pleasures of life nor make us want to go live in an ascetic commune where "religion" and controversial subjects are never discussed.

But the opening you have posted there is calculated to exactly produce the kind of "beautiful obscurity" that it does produce -- a vision of total resignation from active pleasures and withdrawal from society and minimalism that is truly indistinguishable from asceticism.

All you have to do in life is negative:

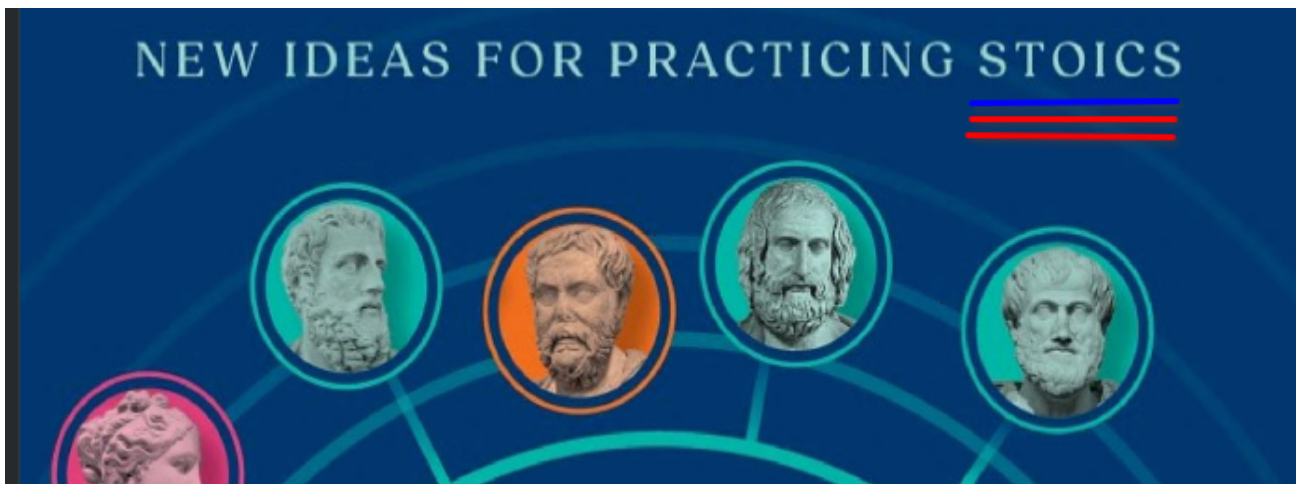
- Don't have any desires (at all, because if you do then they aren't fulfilled).
- Don't be afraid of gods or death (without any explanation as to why - just *don't!*)
- Don't worry about anything you don't already have (because you can get by with bread and water and air).
- Don't worry about anything terrible (not covered in the opening and held until later. They acknowledge that most people find this unconvincing, and explain it only with a reference to Marcus Aurelius repeating but not explaining what are essentially Epicurus' words).

Again, many of the things covered here have a grain of truth to them that can be saved from the wrong construction by knowing the subtleties of Epicurus' terminology. But the real problem I have with this approach is that 98% of normal healthy vigorous people reading this will read this and see it is the philosophy of undertakers giving seminars at nursing homes, and they will run as far and as fast as they can in the opposite direction. And even though i am no longer in my most healthy and vigorous years I will do all i can to keep up with them and get as far as I can from this brand of "Epicurean" philosophy.

I may understand completely that it is not necessary to live forever in order to experience the fulness of pleasure, but that doesn't mean I am going to live like an ascetic in a stupor during the years that I do have.

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2025 at 7:40 AM

I failed to notice the tag line at the top of the front cover. This pretty much says it all, and it carries the implication that the reader is not going to discard his Stoicism, just recharge it. I'd predict the Stoic reader will find plenty of ways to make his Stoicism even worse in the neo-Epicureanism of the material referenced in the first posts above.



Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2025 at 7:46 AM

And I see that to prevent there being any ambiguity, the authors kindly spelled out in the final words before the chapter on Epicurus that the best kind of pleasure is absence of pain, *particularly of the mental variety* - so no need to worry about focusing any attention on bodily pleasures!!!

In the next chapter, we'll continue our pursuit of pleasure from a very different angle. Instead of focusing on bodily pleasures, we'll explore the viewpoint of Epicurus, who thought that the best kind of pleasure was the absence of pain, particularly of the mental variety.

Post by "Don" of August 12, 2025 at 7:49 AM

As is my usual practice, I reference Dr. Austin's article:

[Are the Modern Stoics Really Epicureans?](#)

The Modern Stoicism movement has embraced the classical philosophy, often as part of project of disciplining emotion with rationality. Perhaps adherents should...

www.hnn.us

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2025 at 7:51 AM

course of his reflections, Epicurus came to believe that to seek pleasure and to flee from pain is at the heart of human nature.

Interesting choice of words that I find very telling, whether chosen consciously or subconsciously.

Don't approach pain in life as something to be overcome through reasoned effort, through realization that pleasure is the guide and goal of life, and even through the judicious *use* of pain for the production of greater pleasure.

No, don't approach pain with vigor and determination to keep pain in its place.

Just FLEE from pain with as much speed and abandon as you can!

That's the message of Epicurus as the Stoics and other enemies of Epicurus want you to see it.

Post by “Cassius” of August 12, 2025 at 8:02 AM

More generally, the Epicureans were fairly radical empiricists, valuing what our senses tell us while being distrustful of our reasoning abilities. In this way, they differed dramatically from other schools that we'll examine later on, such as the Platonists and the Stoics. For example, imagine partially submerging a stick

This strikes me as being *particularly* poorly stated (or well stated if your goal is to misrepresent Epicurus).

Epicurus does not distrust our reasoning abilities. Epicurus insists on reason, Epicurus uses reason vigorously and thoroughly, Epicurus establishes the existence of atoms and his entire physics based on reason, Lucretius describes Epicurean philosophy as true reason.

What Epicurus is distrustful of is Stoics and others who claim for reason things that reason (in the form of dialectical logic) cannot do. Words are useful, but they are not reality, and you cannot find truth by looking to syllogisms rather than by using the senses, anticipations, and feelings along with reason.

It's not reason that is to be distrusted, but Stoicism.

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2025 at 8:05 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Just FLEE from pain with as much speed and abandon as you can!

Well, they're word choice is correct but in the wrong place. The old "choice and avoidance" is better translated as "choose and flee" but we aren't encouraged to flee from pain. We're instructed to choose the path that leads to the most pleasure, and sometimes that means experiencing some pain.

The whole chapter is a trainwreck from beginning to end.

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2025 at 8:56 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It's not reason that is to be distrusted, but Stoicism.

I would even say that it's not even "but Stoicism" it is" but reliance on reason alone separate from the physical material world experienced by your senses."

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2025 at 10:04 AM

Also Don, I think an effective counterpoint to the modern implications of "flee" (that you are running away in fear, even panic, as if someone had yelled "fire" in a theatre) I would use what you have cited from the last day of Epicurus as to arraying pleasure against pain, as in a battle.

To me a battle or opposition analogy is much more indicative of the real meaning. The word isn't by any means wide enough to cover your actions toward pain pain in *every* instance, because sometimes you are actually *choosing* pain.

So I can see why the translators might use choose and *avoid*, as avoid doesn't have the fear and panic associations. "Avoid" has other negative connotations of its own, however, such as a certain lack of "seriousness" as if your action is a matter of mild preference as opposed to something important.

In the end just like in so many cases words have many connotations, some accurate and intended and some not, so it's always a matter of taking care to explain when there is ambiguity.

And I would say that to take the full modern understanding of "fleeing" from pain at face value would be a huge misreading. Epicurus didn't "flee" from the gods, he stood up to them, worked to understand them, and actually embraced certain aspects of them. And as a generalization that kind of face-up-to-it -and-overcome-it where-necessary attitude is a lot more accurate picture of the correct attitude toward pain than the single word "fleeing" can convey.

flee

verb [I or T, never passive]

us /fli:/ **uk** /fli:/present participle **fleeing** | past tense and past participle **fled**

Add to word list

C1

to **escape** by **running** away, **especially** because of **danger** or **fear**:

flee from *She fled from the [room](#) in [tears](#).*

flee to *In [order](#) to [escape capture](#), he fled to the [mountains](#).*

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2025 at 10:57 AM

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, φεύγω](#)

This is the word the Epicureans used, including Epicurus:

φεύγω • (pheúgō)

(intransitive) to flee, run off, go a certain direction with haste (often with prepositions)

(transitive) to flee, escape, avoid, get away from (danger or trouble)

(transitive or intransitive) to leave the country, go into exile

(intransitive) to be exiled, banished, driven out of the country [with ὑπό (hupó, + genitive) ‘by someone’]

(intransitive, present and imperfect) to be in exile, live in banishment

(perfect) to have escaped, be safe from

(law, chiefly present and imperfect) to be accused of a crime; often with δίκην (díkēn) and genitive of the crime

Usage notes

The present and imperfect often have a conative reading: to try to get away, intend to leave.

Post by “Rolf” of August 12, 2025 at 11:30 AM

Wow, what a mess. I'd struggle to write a more misleading and inaccurate description of Epicureanism if I tried. It's a real shame that some people will read this and think they have an accurate impression of the philosophy.

Post by "DaveT" of August 12, 2025 at 11:43 AM

I follow the issue discussed here, but my perspective is a bit different. First, not too many people are going to read this book. On Amazon, it has 27 reader reviews, and it's been out since last January. Second, it is a self-help book as much as any other content, to help people deal with the 21st century. Third, his market is an overwhelmingly Christianized western world, which is dominated by the belief in an Abrahamic divinity's providential influence as trials and tribulations upon mankind. (Whew!)

To me, the earlier Austin reference by [Don](#). It cuts to the perhaps largest issue when comparing the similarities and distinctions in the Stoic vs Epicurean debate. And this debate is essentially the same one that mental health counselors, psychiatrists and many other professions that focus on helping people cope with the struggle to live better in our modern western world (without regard to religion). I don't see how one wins or loses in this philosophical battle over a book that only partially addresses Epicurus' truths. I think perhaps any discussion of Epicurus is a good one. Kind of like the cynical quip, "I don't care too much what you write about me, just spell my name correctly in the newspaper."

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2025 at 11:49 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Wow, what a mess. I'd struggle to write a more misleading and inaccurate description of Epicureanism if I tried. It's a real shame that some people will read this and think they have an accurate impression of the philosophy.

Yes it is a mess.

And everyone needs to be aware that other than Emily Austin's book, DeWitt's book and probably a few others that don't come to mind at the moment, what is being presented in this article is by far the majority and mainstream version of what is taught about Epicurus today.

In fact you have to really work hard to find something OTHER than this interpretation.

So right from the start I like to warn people to be prepared. For this purpose I arbitrarily divide the world into two categories of people:

If you're a "Category 1" person who thinks the most important thing in life is to be calm and tranquil and avoid conflict and disagreement at any cost (which is what many people who claim to love Epicurus want you to accept was what Epicurus taught) then you've come to the wrong place in visiting EpicureanFriends! 😊

On the other hand, if you're a "Category 2" person willing to stand up against a crowd, be independent, and read the texts for yourself, then there's nothing more rewarding than studying the ancient texts for yourself. That's the only real way to get to the bottom of what Epicurus was really saying, and that's what we are doing at Epicureanfriends - some of us in the original languages and some of us in translations.

I'd like to think it is possible to change someone from being a Category 1 person into a Category 2 person, and indeed I do think we have seen some of that over ten years at EpicureanFriends. But it is an extremely hard thing to do, and the longer and more deeply someone has accepted Stoicism or Buddhism or something similar in the past, the harder it is to do.

VS52. Friendship dances around the world, bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.

VS41. We must laugh and philosophize at the same time, and do our household duties, and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.

Post by “Rolf” of August 12, 2025 at 12:38 PM

Well said. Even if this particular book is fairly inconsequential, as Dave mentioned, it's a shame because it represents the vast majority of discourse around Epicurus.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the most important thing in life is to be calm and tranquil and avoid conflict and disagreement at any cost

Hmm, I definitely have a little category 1 in me. ☐ But I will fight valiantly for pleasure and to defend my tranquil life against BS (religious or otherwise). I see what you're saying though.

Epicureanism is far less compatible with Buddhism and Stoicism than many people seem to think.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

DeWitt's book

Just received it today. 😊

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2025 at 2:04 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

First, not too many people are going to read this book. On Amazon, it has 27 reader reviews, and it's been out since last January.

Good perspective... albeit still aggravating they get away with it. Discussing in a wider forum could just call more attention to it.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

it's a shame because it represents the vast majority of discourse around Epicurus.

Agreed.

Post by “Patrikios” of August 14, 2025 at 4:04 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

DeWitt's book

Just received it today. 😊

[Rolf](#)

I recently completed DeWitt's book. It is comprehensive and helpful. I keep finding Christian overtones seeping through in some of his later chapters. But a review of that book by DeWitt may be a discussion in another thread.

Post by "Don" of August 14, 2025 at 5:55 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

But a review of that book by DeWitt may be a discussion in another thread.

[Epicurus And His Philosophy - Norman DeWitt](#)

I've made a number of posts here:

[Epicurus and His Philosophy - Chapter Specific Threads](#)

Post by "DaveT" of August 15, 2025 at 4:06 PM

In addition to the texts here on the website, I've just started reading "The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia" by Brad Inwood and L.P.Gerson. I find it easier to read than DeWitt. In addition to the usual texts, I am anticipating getting to the part containing extensive short fragments and testimonia from other various ancient sources. It's about 100 pages in total. DeWitt's argumentative and old fashioned professorial style is a chore for me.

Post by "Don" of August 15, 2025 at 4:28 PM

Inwood and Gerson are solid translations.