

# Article By Dr. Emily Austin - "Epicurus And The Politics Of The Fear Of Death"

Post by "Pacatus" of December 9, 2025 at 2:50 PM

An article by Emily Austin that I don't recall seeing on here:



[Epicurus on the Politics of Fearing Death](#)

Epicurus often serves as the standard-bearer for the view that we can and should use our rational capacities to eliminate our fear of death. Although Epicurus...  
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Post by "Cassius" of December 10, 2025 at 8:18 AM

That's a great catch Pacatus thank you! I do not recall that we have discussed this or in my case that I was aware of it at all.

I see the download watermark says 2013 so I presume it's at last that old but I can't really confirm the date of publication from the PDF.

At first glance and before reading the whole thing the parts I have skimmed strike me as very good. Her interpretations of Epicurus are reasonable here as they are in her book - she seems to be saying that Epicurus does not demand total absence of pain and that he realizes that some fear of death is inevitable and even useful.

If that's her position then this should prove to be a very useful addition to arguments that Epicurus should not be interpreted as setting up a neo-mystical state of "total elimination of all

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4843-article-by-dr-emily-austin-epicurus-and-the-politics-of-the-fear-of-death/>

pain" as his goal.

Rather, as to death and everything else, he's focused on a practical view of happiness seen as a practical balance of pleasure over pain in which we are happy even as we inevitably, and sometimes voluntarily, experience some pain.

#### Quote

I have argued that Epicurus does not believe all forms of the fear of death are irrational and eliminable. At least one fear – the fear of violent death caused by others – is brute and must be managed politically. If I am right, Epicurus' beliefs would seem much more reasonable to many people who recognize that we have a vested interest in controlling the fear of death, but who are skeptical about our ability to eliminate it. Epicurus would no longer believe that a person can study a set of arguments, believe them, chant them regularly to herself or with friends, and thereby rid herself of the many varieties of the fear of death. Others, however, might think my thesis renders Epicurus' beliefs about the fear of death much less exciting. If one is primarily interested in Epicurus' views on death because his extremism makes him a useful foil, then he might no longer be the biggest target. Likewise, if one looks to Epicurus to eliminate all varieties of one's own fear of death, then one might need to seek extra assistance.

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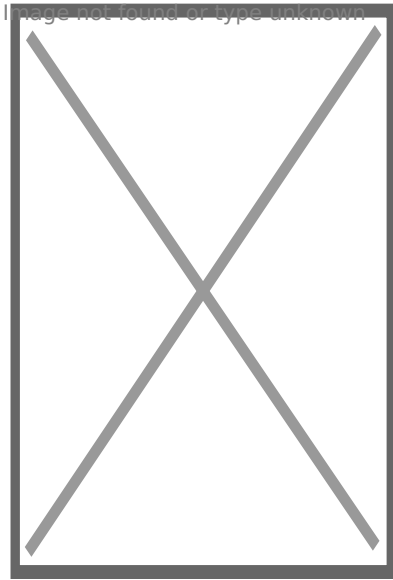
### Post by "Don" of December 10, 2025 at 8:25 AM

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 10, 2025 at 8:51 AM

I have to stand up and cheer at this paragraph and especially the first sentence. Many modern proponents of Epicurus (not just Warren) have boxed themselves into exactly the position that Austin describes as insufficient.

This first sentence is such an understatement! As I read further into the article it's beginning to occur to me that she's having to "waste time." Some of what Warren et al have suggested are positions that I would say no one but a Stoic or Buddhist would have found entertainable in the first place. But that's where much of modern Epicurean commentary has left us, having to go through and dismiss corruptions like she is attacking here in a very understated way.

This is an excellent article.

### Quote

Occupying an argumentative space in which one lacks reason to avoid easily and ethically avoidable deaths should, I think, be a last resort. An Epicurean, then, should first search out something other than pain to explain her decision to seek her own safety and ensure the safety of others. For instance, she might avoid the tyrant because death at the hands of the

tyrant is unpredictable and uncertain. She might claim that mental anxiety arising from uncertainty justifies her escape rather than the prospect of physical pain. The standard interpretation clearly prohibits this response, however, since anxiety about uncertain death is a species of the fear of death, and the standard interpretation insists that all fears of death are irrational and eliminable. Fear about when one's death will occur is outright a fear of death.

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## Post by "Cassius" of December 10, 2025 at 9:18 AM

OH NO! A great point but far too brief! I wish she had gone into this further but she stopped before elaborating.

I'd say she's definitely right in the point below, and this is one of the most important take-aways of the article that goes far beyond the issue of death. The Epicurean goal is not perfectionism of absolute elimination of all pain before you can consider yourself to be truly happy. This section too is very understated and diplomatic, but very very implicitly critical of "wikipedia Epicureanism:"

### Quote

There remains one key objection: it seems that my interpretation threatens the possibility of ataraxia. Fear, like grief, is a negative emotion, so an argument that claims we are all motivated to act in light of an ineliminable (though generally controllable) fear might appear to undercut the Epicurean quest for an anxiety-free life. If my thesis requires that Epicurus jettison a fundamental psychological principle that guides his eudaemonist ethics, interpretive consistency is very much against me. One live option is to retreat to the idea that Epicureanism is a perfectionist ethics, according to which even the best of us can only approximate ataraxia, if only because there are some psychological and bodily limitations imposed on natural creatures. Perfectionism is not a terribly uncommon feature of ancient ethical theories, and those who are perfect are often judged divine rather than human.<sup>29</sup> Another alternative is to reconceive ataraxia in light of evidence that even sages experience characteristically negative emotions. Some texts, for instance, indicate that the sage grieves the deaths of her friends and shares their suffering. On this front, Epicureans seek to differentiate themselves from the Stoics, whose resistance to grief seemed positively inhumane (VS

66, DL X, 120; Plutarch, A Pleasant Life, 1101ab: Us. 120). If the sage achieves and maintains ataraxia, yet grieves at the same time, then ataraxia might withstand some other natural, negative human emotions.

A more general takeaway here is how this article serves as a warning to the deep issues between Epicurean commentators. A lot of this article is a very diplomatic attack on the positions of people like James Warren. I haven't devoted a lot of time over the years to criticizing Warren directly, but it seems to me that his positions are often indicative of a sort of "British Epicureanism" that has a large of element of Stoicism baked in.

That's not to slam at everything he writes or on all British writers on Epicurus. I'd say that David Sedley and/or Martin Ferguson Smith are the greatest living interpreters of Epicurus. But after them, and already exceeding them in some ways, I'd say is Emily Austin. She seems to me to be free of almost all this British Stoic/Buddhist influence which has many Epicureans at the point where they don't seem able to articulate a strong position why they would have any care as to whether this day is their last.

But there are deep problems with the British Epicureanism that is often accepted as the orthodox way to interpret Epicurus. This article is a great example of pushing back against that.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of December 10, 2025 at 9:24 AM**

Pacatus thank you again! Joshua was sick on Sunday and we missed our weekly recording session. I've been casting around for a topic to record something short so we wouldn't miss the week. This article is perfect for me to record a few excerpts and comments for this week's episode. So this was a very timely contribution!

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### **Post by “TauPhi” of December 10, 2025 at 3:32 PM**

This article conflates and equates two different concepts: the fear of death and the fear of dying. Emily Austin provides four varieties of the fear of death at the beginning of the article but only the first one is an actual fear of death. Remaining three are variations on fear of dying.

- (1) the fear of being dead;
- (2) the fear that one will die, that one's life is going to end;
- (3) the fear of premature death; and
- (4) the fear of the process of dying.

She then proceeds with her article and continuously describes fear of dying as fear of death.

I find it quite misleading because to my understanding Epicurus tried to remove (1) the fear of being dead. He never tried to remove fear of dying (2), (3), (4) because process of dying and everything connected with it belongs to the living and is painful and human beings can't switch off pain at their will. If they could, the whole Epicurean philosophy would make no sense and pain and pleasure could no longer be considered canonical. People can, however, minimise the fear of dying by the means described in the article. People can also be unafraid of being dead. These two things shouldn't be put in the same basket under 'fear of death' label.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of December 10, 2025 at 3:53 PM**

#### [Quote from TauPhi](#)

I find it quite misleading because to my understanding Epicurus tried to remove (1) the fear of being dead. He never tried to remove fear of dying (2), (3), (4) because process of dying and everything connected with it belongs to the living and is painful and human beings can't switch off pain at their will.

I read that statement (and everything you wrote after it) as exactly the point of her article, Tau Phi. And she is criticizing as misleading the position taken by Warren and others for doing what you too are criticizing.

So you are agreeing with her? Or are you saying that her article is what is misleading?

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### **Post by “TauPhi” of December 10, 2025 at 4:05 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

So you are agreeing with her? Or are you saying that her article is what is misleading?

What is misleading is calling fear of dying and fear of death the same - fear of death. This article should be called 'Epicurus on the Politics of Fearing of *Dying*'

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### **Post by “Cassius” of December 10, 2025 at 4:27 PM**

Ok so you're focusing on the title rather than the content. The article itself seems clear enough to me, but I haven't had a lot of time to digest it and it's possible I'll reread and change my opinion later.

On first reading of the article and your comment I'd say that the both of you are coming from the same perspective. There's nothing to be concerned about after death (incorrectly thought of a "being dead") but there's a lot to be concerned about in terms of how and when we die.

And I read the takeaways of her article to be that it is ridiculous to conclude that Epicurus taught the same attitude toward "being dead" as he did toward how long we live and the circumstances under which we stop living. But that's exactly what many seem to be doing, and it turns the philosophy on its head to take that position.

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### **Post by “TauPhi” of December 10, 2025 at 4:58 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Ok so you're focusing on the title rather than the content.

I couldn't care less about the title. I'm trying to make people aware that calling fear of dying and fear of death the same thing is misleading. I'm not saying Emily Austin wrote a bad article - she didn't. It's a very interesting article but for people who are new to Epicurus' concepts it will not be as clear as it is to you, [Cassius](#) .

The conclusions like that:

#### Quote

I have argued that Epicurus does not believe all forms of the fear of death are irrational and eliminable. At least one fear - the fear of violent death caused by others - is brute and must be managed politically. [...]

or that:

#### Quote

In sum, I argue that Epicurus believes there is a fear of death that does not disappear, which we can control with due care and with close attention to the social environs. Though my thesis might render Epicurus less of a radical with regards the fear of death than heretofore believed, and though it may even make him seem a bit less than perfectly brave, I maintain that it is a good way to make sense of the text. [...]

are perfectly fine when you understand she's talking about *fear of dying* and not *fear of death*. There are no different forms of the fear of death in Epicurus' system. Epicurus was as radical about fear of death as it's humanly possible - we can't experience death so there's nothing to be afraid of. This radical claim is crucial to his system because it slams the door shut on supernaturalism, heaven, hell, eternal punishment, reward etc., and it leaves no backdoor option to get back to such concepts.

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### Post by “Don” of December 11, 2025 at 5:31 PM

#### [Quote from TauPhi](#)

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Well said [TauPhi](#)

The fact that "dying" is a physical process where we are STILL aware and sensations have not been dissolved is of paramount importance here, dying is NOT nothing to us because we are aware, sensing, and feeling. I agree with [TauPhi](#) that conflating "fear of (ways of) dying" and "fear of death (the end result of dying)" are two very different things. We try to avoid certain ways of dying through our actions and decisions and taking care of our health. If we end up with a terminal diagnosis without recourse to therapy, medicine, surgery, etc., then we \*could/should/can\* focus on our coming death with the knowledge that "[death is nothing to us](#)." I can even see a bit/bite of grief for "leaving the stage" but, optimally, it should not overwhelm or deprive us of the pleasure left to us, rob us of pleasant memories.

I need to re-read Austin's paper and refresh my memory. I vaguely remember seeing it several years ago (I think)? Or maybe I bookmarked it in Academia.edu and didn't get back to it.

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## Post by "Cassius" of December 11, 2025 at 7:29 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I need to re-read Austin's paper and refresh my memory. I vaguely remember seeing it several years ago (I think)? Or maybe I bookmarked it in Academia.edu and didn't get back to it.

Tau Phi's point on "fear of death" is correct and I think all of us (even Warren and the people holding the viewpoint that is the target of the article) are all agreed on that.

The reason I don't recall discussing this previously, and the reason I think the article needs more discussion now, is that the main point of the article is not necessarily to make the point which we all agree. The point of the article is to point out that there is a specific position taken by major writers on Epicurus (including Warren) with which Emily Austin disagrees.

We discussed this a little on Wednesday night but haven't fleshed it out in writing. The key section revolves around whether Epicurus held all "fear of death" or "fear of dying" to be "eliminable" through philosophy.

It's going to be necessary to be precise about the implications of both "fear" and "death vs dying" but it seems clear that Austin's reason for writing the article was her intent to state a disagreement with a "mainstream" position, and it's in areas like that where I think her work is most valuable.

We won't even begin to discuss her point til are able to see clearly what she states is her intent in writing the article and what (and who) she thinks she is writing against. The article covers lots of topics so it takes some effort to get to that point.

The general consensus is that Epicurus believed the fear of death to be wholly irrational and eliminable. I intend to argue otherwise. An important background commitment of the standard interpretation is that Epicurus was an 'intellectualist' (or 'cognitivist') about emotions. For the intellectualist, a fear simply is a belief or a set of beliefs. Thus, a person who irrationally fears death suffers from false beliefs, and eliminating her fear is a process of altering those beliefs in response to sound arguments. A ra-

I would say that Austin's level of analysis and willingness to depart from the mainstream here is a good example of why "Living For Pleasure" is by far the best recent book on Epicurus.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of December 12, 2025 at 11:27 AM

In the real world of actual experience, I'd like to question whether or not you can easily separate the "fear of the state of being dead" from "the fear of the process of dying".

This year I got the flu twice, and it was really bad in January, and slightly not as painful when I got it at the start of November. Everyone knows both from experience and modern medicine that most people that are in generally good health recover from the flu. But imagine experiencing some sickness and not knowing if you were going to die from it. Even now with modern medicine, there are times when it is unclear if a sick or injured person is going to recover or eventually die, and so that uncertainty could cause anxiety.

It would seem that if you "feel okay with" the concept of death, then the process of dying should theoretically not cause as much anxiety.

Here is a movie that might go with this discussion:

[https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=NPoGXqNV\\_wc](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=NPoGXqNV_wc)

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## Post by “Don” of December 12, 2025 at 12:09 PM

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

It would seem that if you "feel okay with" the concept of death, then the process of dying should theoretically not cause as much anxiety.

Excellent point [Kalosyni](#), and you actually gave voice to something similar rolling around in my head.

(Caveat: I'm still getting around to reading Dr. Austin's paper)

[TauPhi](#) gave the four "fears of death" from the paper:

- (1) the fear of being dead;
- (2) the fear that one will die, that one's life is going to end;
- (3) the fear of premature death; and
- (4) the fear of the process of dying.

I would agree that Epicurus directly attacked (and won against, from my perspective):

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4843-article-by-dr-emily-austin-epicurus-and-the-politics-of-the-fear-of-death/>

- (1) - no sensation/no existence/no thing
- (2) - Epicurus emphasized that we and every other compound thing is transient, mortal, and will eventually dissolve. There is nothing to fear from the FACT that our life will end. It feeds directly into (1). The 2nd line of the tetrapharmakos is literally something like "There is no need for the suspicion of something awful happening when we die. 'When we are dead' is a nonsensical/irrational statement because we will not BE after we die."
- (3) - In the greater scheme of things, there really is no such thing as "premature" death. We die when we die. That is NOT to say we don't feel grief - *biting, gnawing, indescribable, screaming* grief - if someone dies young or "before their time." But who's to say what one's "time" is? There are things that happen by chance, things that happen by necessity, and things we have control over. The time of our death (unless under controlled circumstances) is up to chance by and large.

To get even more granular, there seem to be several sub-divisions of (4). If one has a terminal diagnosis (as in the clip [Kalosyni](#) played), we can decide if we want to go through months of chemotherapy or to live out our lives, with pain managed, and live as fully as possible before dying. Do we "rage against the dying of the light" or do we "go with the flow"? I'm not going to judge either decision, but it's a decision on the "process" we would go through. Both have pain and pleasure involved. There is also fear of the way one will die. If we make choices to avoid certain circumstances, we need not fear some ways that lead to death. But, there is a BIG element of chance to the WAY in which we might die. Getting in the shower, slip on the soap, bang your head, massive concussion, no one finds you for awhile. Not seeing a speeding car and stepping off the sidewalk. Genetic abnormality in a brain vessel or your aorta completely undetected and one ruptures. Choking on a piece of food while dining alone at home. If we would obsess over the ways in which we might die, we would drive ourselves to all kinds of fear, anxiety, and depression!

Okay, now I need to read the paper before I comment anymore.

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 12, 2025 at 12:15 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Okay, now I need to read the paper before I comment anymore

I don't think reading the paper will change anything you've written, which I think is correct. What reading the paper might do, and I hope it will, is to get you to comment on exactly what viewpoint by some modern scholars of Epicurus she thinks needs to be opposed.

## **Post by “DaveT” of December 12, 2025 at 2:59 PM**

Perhaps reminding ourselves that Epicureans believe he meant what he said, and he said what he meant. Fear of Death is definite. If he didn't say fear of dying, then he didn't mean to infer it within the concept of fear of Death. Sometimes I think academics who are subject to publish or perish search for distinctions between themselves and others academics so they have something to write about. Sure, I'm not as knowledgeable as the experts, but I try to remind myself to "Keep it simple, sugar!"

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## **Post by “Cassius” of December 12, 2025 at 3:11 PM**

### [Quote from DaveT](#)

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I interpret that as being on the same page with most everyone. Since you Dave are one of our most recent additions, I'd be particularly interested in what you get out of the article if you get a chance to read it.

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of December 12, 2025 at 3:14 PM**

--fyi to everyone--We are setting the Fourth Sunday to discuss this article--open to all fully registered members.

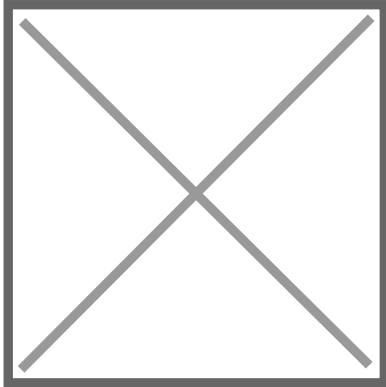
[epicureanfriends.com/thread/4847/](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4847/)

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## **Post by “Don” of December 12, 2025 at 4:31 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4843-article-by-dr-emily-austin-epicurus-and-the-politics-of-the-fear-of-death/>

Another potential paper to add to the mix:



[Epicurus on the Fear of Death and the Relative Value of Lives](#)

Epicurus argued that death is no misfortune, because when a person dies, he no longer has sensation, and sensation is a necessary condition of value for a...  
[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

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### **Post by “DaveT” of December 13, 2025 at 9:18 AM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I interpret that as being on the same page with most everyone. Since you Dave are one of our most recent additions, I'd be particularly interested in what you get out of the article if you get a chance to read it.

I had already begun the article before commenting earlier. However I decided it wasn't worth my brain buster skills to follow along and I stopped without finishing it. If I was asked by Emily Austin what I thought about it, I'd ask her in turn, why she bothered to address that issue and publish it. (The same could be asked of her interlocutors)

If I knew her and could be frank, I'd say it was not exactly sophistry in the negative connotation, though it was an argument for the sake of argument in order to prove an opinion. Could there be a nugget later on that made it useful to me? Perhaps, but overall the paper didn't make me care enough to find out.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of December 13, 2025 at 9:26 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4843-article-by-dr-emily-austin-epicurus-and-the-politics-of-the-fear-of-death/>

### [Quote from DaveT](#)

Could there be a nugget later on that made it useful to me? Perhaps, but overall the paper didn't make me care enough to find out.

I feel very differently than you do [DaveT](#) and I think it provides an excellent springboard for discussing many aspects of death and dying. Perhaps you feel very confident that you have conquered all your fears for all aspects of death and pain. But for those of us who still have work to do, for the upcoming [Fourth Sunday](#), I'll present some discussion questions which I believe will provide some helpful "existential therapy".

Likely some aspects of the paper will be used more "lightly" and other aspects more "deeply", so my goal is not to only approach it from an "academic" aspect, but also from human life and feeling.

Reading the article is optional for attendees, as I will do a short presentation before opening up the discussion.

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## **Post by “DaveT” of December 13, 2025 at 11:57 AM**

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Likely some aspects of the paper will be used more "lightly" and other aspects more "deeply", so my goal is not to only approach it from an "academic" aspect, but also from human life and feeling.

Yes, that seems to be a very reasonable way to springboard a conversation. I, as one closer to death than most of our friends, I "try" to not fear death, and while seeking support for that in Epicurus, I submit to it's inevitability. No big issue there, certainly. At the same time, I might worry in a small way that there might be something I might lose an opportunity before a sudden death, to say, or do, or mend a fence before I get around to it. And this, I think is the lighter approach, the common sense that we all possess, whether Epicureans or not, to address the fear of dying unexpectedly. And I don't think the deep treatment of that issue was needed in Austin's paper, written as a dialogue among professional philosophers.

I'd like to add that for me, overcoming the fear of death, is less than overcoming a feared cessation of living. It is more a confident denial that there will be some consequence for me after death when my sins are weighed against the rest of my life with a thumb up or down and it is too late to make amends.

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## Post by “Eikadistes” of December 13, 2025 at 1:25 PM

Superficially, I'm not sure I like the idea of identifying "fear" as the motivating factor behind preventing preventable death, versus, perhaps, *rational avoidance*. Then again, we practice avoidance to prevent non-constructive pain, and fear is definitely painful ... but is it constructive? In that regard, fear is a fellow actor on the stage of wisdom, but, playing the role of an antagonist? So I think I hesitate to place "fear" in a positive context. But it is natural, so... I'm not sure.

Regardless, I **really** enjoyed the approach Professor Austin took in terms of reviewing *the response to the fear of death* as a thing that can be "politically managed", beyond cultivating impassiveness. Contextualizing civic engagement as an approach to satisfying our natural and necessary desires, I believe, is the right way to discuss the field of politics from an Epicurean perspective, and I'm definitely going to spend some time thinking about modern politics from this view.

Truly, we all live in a city without walls when it comes to the true, universal antagonists of human history, those being disease and natural disasters. We have to find a way to tolerate those things. We're all faced with the death of our parents, and the deaths of friends. We're all faced with infirmity. Someone will suffer our own absence. One, measly volcano popped 70k years ago, and (SLAM) our species dropped below 10,000 individuals. One, tiny mutation occurs in one, little microbe, and (SLAM) 20 million people die. Human beings have (perhaps until the modern era) no capacity to mitigate those events; but on the spectrum of *Choice-to-Fate*, some threats are more "fate", and some are more "choice". We can't stop volcanic eruptions. *Maybe* we can learn to re-direct a planet-hungry asteroid? Still, by comparison, we can **definitely** mitigate political violence and civic unrest (even if our ability to influence it is *very, very* small: that freedom exists).

And, given that, coherent with the Epicurean project, I think it's correct to be pissed when good law is violated, when friends engage in betrayal, and when children die of political violence. Should we "fear" those things? ... maybe? ... I *think* I ultimately agree with Professor Austin. I'm not sure if we *should*, or if we *can* justify that Epíkouros thought so, but I certainly do fear.

There's a lot here, but what I **can** say for sure, is that, personally, I fear dying **before** I have the opportunity to enjoy the same privileges of the rest of my family. I observe my parents' generation, and all of my older cousins, *all of them*, both educated and uneducated, blue collar and white collar, academic, industrial, commercial, casual, formal ... *all of them* had kids, bought cars, owned homes, invested in the market, and *half* of them advanced their economic class. In history books, I learn that they enjoyed several decades of historically-unique social advances. From childhood, I remember my parents enjoying unemployment and supplemental

income. In middle management, my dad was afforded a company car, and a company phone, and robust health insurance on top of his competitive salary that only required a general B.A. from WVU in the 70s. All of those people in my life were presented with the opportunity to choose to go to school, or apprentice with a professional, or take a risk investing in a business, or start their own with modest resources. Every one of them could provide the name of a general physician ... because they had one.

All of those things fulfilled their natural and necessary desires. They weren't just *privileges*, or *luxuries*. None of those things were pursued for entertainment, or to diversify their pleasures. Those were rungs on the ladder of meeting their ability to gain employment, make money, eat food, and grow. In the modern era, access to education and technology are as much a necessity as food and water. Or maybe not? Maybe that's up for debate? ... you can infer where I stand.

I observe that my role as a civilian, consumer, and taxpayer (which *at least* used to provide safety) is being re-oriented toward legally-indentured-servitude. We know it now. I'm living it. This isn't speculation. We will not buy a home. I cannot participate in the market. My vote has never counted. Owning a car is about to become a luxury. We will be leasing our next vehicle. I am going without healthcare next year so my wife gets her life-necessary meds. By the way, our insulin just tripled in price. We can no longer save money. We're skipping groceries. My education and experience cannot guarantee employment. The majority of the population is now leasing their living needs, and not from life, but from other individual members of our society who have measurably violated the pact to neither harm nor be harmed among other members of their society. We are being affected by measurably psychopathic personalities who do not recognize our role as moral, human agents. All of this is a violation of pacts that were put in place by my grandparents to preserve our future. I'm pissed, and politically active, because the peaceful pact to neither harm nor be harmed is being politically violated, and nothing less than a political response is appropriate to satisfy my natural and necessary desires. Me do anything less right now seem like Stoic surrender to apathy.

Everyone around me seems surprised that I'm angry. "Trust God" they tell me. "Things have a way of working themselves out" they say. Well, not in Gaza. Not in Kashmir. Not in the projects. Santa Claus tends to prefer neighborhoods with property values. God helps some people win Super Bowls, but gives kids cancer. There are limits to happiness. After all, as Epikouros observed, "a person cannot become wise with every physical condition, nor in every cultural context" (10.117). Those limits were not set by measles and hurricanes. *People* did that. *People* who are our neighbors, who have measurably violated the pacts my grandparents formulated to secure a peaceful society. *People* are withholding education in a technologically advanced society. *People* are proliferating our streets with weapons of war. *People* are responsible for these problems, because of violations.

Fear of *being dead*, *death*, and *dying* is one thing, but fear of losing your life, or losing the life of a friend as a result of betrayal, wrath, or a violation of justice is another thing. Hermarkhos attests that the creation of *law*, in the first place, is a necessary act for wise people to prevent

future harm. So we need to engage law as though it is as real as a rainstorm. Epikouros explains that society, in the first place, naturally developed because it is advantageous to individuals, so a stable society is part of the prescription Nature provides for humans. Furthermore, he explains that all individuals, in all societies cannot become wise and enjoy pure pleasure, because, if for no other reason, you don't have time to study nature. A variety of severe, physiological conditions eliminate the possibility of uninterrupted pleasure. I think it is fair to propose that *ataraxia* is an impossibility for anyone living in a warzone right now, and no amount of spiritual rearrangement is going to prevent bombs from continuing to drop, and spiritual confusion is not the problem, the bombs are.

I don't know. While I'm afraid I'll never be able to provide my family with the basic living necessities that previous generations have defined as requirements for our society, I think, when I take a breath, and just accept that my life will look more like my great-great grandparents, than anyone living ... I think, then, I calm down, I lose my fear, and I just respond to situations rationally, to the best of my ability, with the hope that I'm learning from my mistakes, and growing, despite failure. In that regard, I'm more motivated by the pleasure of hope and confidence than the fear of death.

I don't really have a point. That was mostly pontificating. Overall, great paper!

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### Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2025 at 5:29 PM

#### [Quote from Eikadistes](#)

Superficially, I'm not sure I like the idea of identifying "fear" as the motivating factor behind preventing preventable death, versus, perhaps, rational avoidance.

Great post, Eikadistes, and I want to emphasize how much I share this view. I am not "afraid" of pain because I know it can be overcome or escaped. But even though I am not "afraid" I am sure as heck motivated to act against it and make sure that I don't have to suffer any more than is necessary. This is simply rational, and it's not the attitude of an ostrich or a cat constantly running from pain as if in a panic. Once we learn the facts of nature we don't have to be "afraid," but we sure as heck ought to be motivated to take our wisdom and act, not just "think" about our problems will eventually go away on their own or at death.

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### Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2025 at 7:35 PM

Also @Eikadistes you have raised one of the subtleties of the article that is not apparent til you read it thoroughly.

The issue is not simply limited to "we are afraid of dying a painful death because we don't want pain."

As Austin points out, if that were the only issue, there would no reason for us ever to be concerned about a painless death, even if we are 20 years old or even if we are good health and something happens to cause our death tomorrow.

We're not "afraid" of death, we act to postpone and avert death not just in those cases where the process of dying is painful. We want to live because Nature has programmed us to "live for pleasure" (the subtitle of her book).

This should not have to be debated or discussed, but it does, and I think it's fair to say that appears to be the ultimate motivation of her article.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 13, 2025 at 7:52 PM**

Here is an excerpt from the article, which comes after she states that in theory, of course, it would be preferable to live in an actual Epicurean garden:

#### Quote

However, most people do not happen to chance upon a Garden. The paucity of safe refuges, then, explains the standard Epicurean advice to abstain from political involvement in non-ideal circumstances, unless failure to be involved is a greater threat to one ' s safety than participation (cf. fr. 133 Us.).

This underlined statmeent is consistent with the position taken by Aioz and Baori in their "[Theory and Practice In Epicurean Political Philosophy](#)," and they provide many more citations to establish it firmly.

As a reminder, the reason policy against the discussion of contemporary partisan political issues. The reason for that policy is that individual circumstances vary greatly. It's not Epicurus but Cicero who held that there is a law of god which is the same for all people at all times and all places. It simply not possible here to take sides in immediate political issues without causing

harm to our ultimate mission. But we can certainly bring people together who share core Epicurean values that there are no gods or ideal forms, that life ends at death, and similar core issues. Once people are on basically the same page they are free to, and in my strong opinion should, form local bonds with like-minded and like-situate people to preserve their own security and pursue their own interests.

Certainly there are no supernatural gods or forces that are going to do that for you, and I think it's an important part of Austin's article to note that if we take Epicurean philosophy seriously then we're as individuals going to act to maintain our security and happiness.

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2025 at 8:19 PM

For someone debating whether to comment on this article, here again is one of the key paragraphs:

### Quote

However, note that if Warren is right, the Epicurean seems to lack a clear reason to avoid a painless death. Why should she skip town when she hears that the local tyrant has a penchant for killing aspiring Epicureans painlessly in their sleep? If painless deaths are not bad, then why should she carefully label and store the fast-acting, tasty poison, rather than leave it in the open and accessible to young children? One must wonder what protects the Epicurean from happily courting a painless death. If she does not bother to protect herself against such deaths, then the objection that the fear of death is good if it helps us avoid deaths worth avoiding reasserts itself.

The question comes down to: It's *\*not\** the fear of pain, alone that should cause us to not want to die. But if our only distinction in discussion fear of death is whether the means of death is painful or not, then we're left in the position of not having a good reason (if fear of pain is our only motivation) to avoid a painless death.

Austin is pointing out that this is a problem for those who think that Epicurean philosophy is about nothing more than "fleeing from pain," and she suggests - I think properly - that this could not have been Epicurus himself would not have reasoned in that way and left his followers with no reason not to avoid a painless death.

As I see it this is related to similar issues in the regard to how to articulate "satisfaction." Yes I want to be satisfied at all times which my life in the past and present. but that doesn't mean

that I don't want to live another day and experience more pleasure tomorrow.

Neither "death is nothing to us" nor the various statements about satisfaction should be interpreted in a way that implies that the Epicurean should be indifferent to whether he is alive or dead tomorrow.

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### **Post by "Kalosyni" of December 30, 2025 at 7:58 AM**

It was a good meeting back on Sunday, and one question came up for me afterward, which is regarding the idea of security...can we accurately judge if we are living a life that is safe or not, and whether our basic need for security is being met?

Epicurus said that the first quick, easy, and commonly used understanding regarding a thing (or a word) is the best one to use (I can't remember the exact words or where that is). But also seems important to look at actual situations.

For our current time, it almost becomes about statistics (or being in the wrong place at the wrong time) - we are generally safe, but not totally safe (and it may depend on where one lives). With mass shootings happening, it seems these days if you want kids to "be safer", then homeschooling and attending an online college might help.

According to the article by Austin, we need (and have a natural and necessary need) to feel safe from being violently killed by others and this can't be done through reasoning because it isn't caused by irrational ideas. It can only be done "politically" meaning through creating laws and ways to make society safe.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2025 at 8:48 AM**

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

According to the article by Austin, we need (and have a natural and necessary need) to feel safe from being violently killed by others and this can't be done through reasoning because it isn't caused by irrational ideas. It can only be done "politically" meaning through creating laws and ways to make society safe.

I think her point is that it cannot be done by reasoning ALONE. Every decision ultimately requires good judgment and that involves reasoning. As I see it the point she is making is that after we reason through the appropriate action to take, we must then take that action. Simply thinking about things and not taking any physical action is not going to address the problem of safety or many other problems of similar nature.

Yes we can resolve our fear of "being dead" by thinking about the problem based on observation of the way the world works, and in the case of something that is a wrong attitude you correct a wrong attitude by a correct attitude. But you don't keep yourself safe from crime or invading armies by simply working on your "attitude" about them.

I think ultimately her article is about stressing the practical aspect of Epicurus that we are not just mental creatures, we are also bodily creatures, and living in the real world requires both thought AND action.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2025 at 8:59 AM**

*Simply thinking about things and not taking any physical action is not going to address the problem of safety or many other problems of similar nature.*

I am repeating that statement because I think much of the discussion in our meeting came from questions raised by those who think that this is such a common sense position that the article and its detailed arguments are unnecessary. *Who could be so stupid as to ever advocate thinking alone without taking action to implement one's reasoning?*

The reason I agree that the article was needed is that I perceive many articles about Epicurus by Academics in the last hundred years tend to go exactly in the direction of holding Epicurus to be trying to solve every problem by thought ALONE. That's the same attitude that praises Stoicism similar viewpoints which hold that the only thing that matters in life is virtue. For many of them, virtue is primarily a mental activity, so they argue either explicitly or implicitly that all we need to do is adjust our attitudes about things, and that real-world action is unnecessary.

There is good information about this in Dr Sedley's article "Ethics of Brutus and Cassius" as to the lack of participation by Stoics in taking action during their confrontation with Julius Caesar.

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### **Post by "TauPhi" of December 30, 2025 at 3:25 PM**

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The reason I agree that the article was needed is that I perceive many articles about Epicurus by Academics in the last hundred years tend to go exactly in the direction of holding Epicurus to be trying to solve every problem by thought ALONE.

Correct me if I'm wrong [Cassius](#) but I think it's widely accepted position that Hellenistic Philosophy was largely practical. And this applies not only to Epicureanism but to all main philosophical schools of that period. The main focus was how to live the Good Life and not how to think about the Good Life.

That's why I find the claim somehow strange that many articles were published in the last century which paint Epicurus as someone focused exclusively on theory ('solving every problem by thought alone', as you put it). In fact, it's hard for me to recollect any publications making such claims. If such works exist, please point me to them because I am very curious how such position could be defended.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2025 at 4:11 PM**

### [Quote from TauPhi](#)

Correct me if I'm wrong Cassius but I think it's widely accepted position that Hellenistic Philosophy was largely practical. And this applies not only to Epicureanism but to all main philosophical schools of that period. The main focus was how to live the Good Life and not how to think about the Good Life.

We are talking impressions here and I am sure everyone's will vary. What I would point to are the arguments that are contained in Tusculan Disputations and like works to the effect that "virtue alone" is sufficient for happiness. Part 5 of TD is entirely devoted to the topic, including the criticism of Aristotle as to the argument that anything can really be "good" other than virtue. This is not some quirk of Cicero either - I would argue that it is inherent in Stoicism and its popular interpretation that everything other than virtue is at best a preferred indifferent.

Now, no doubt general perceptions of philosophy are a moving target. Your comment gives me the opportunity to focus on what I see as the part of the target that needs focus here in the mid-2020's:

Epicurus is widely held in "intellectual" circles to hold that the goal of life is "absence of pain." Some (well represented here in this forum) tend to focus on physical aspects of that. However the "intellectual consensus" outside the forum in the words of prominent writers like Warren and Okeefe and others is that Epicurus was promoting a form of "therapy of desire" (the Nussbaum book title). They hold substantially that Epicurus was promoting the lowering of desires to a minimal possible level, which fits quite well into their argument that "absence of pain" does not include what people normally think of as pleasure at all. Their position is not that Epicurus considers mental / appreciation of life pleasures to be part of the Epicurean goal *in addition to* stimulative physical pleasures, they argue that stimulative mental and physical pleasures are not really a part of the Epicurean goal at all, except to the extent that they might occasionally be required (by eating and drinking for example) to obtain their non-active state of "absence of pain." Not everyone is going to agree with me, but that is exactly what I believe they mean when they stress "absence of pain" as the distinguishing feature of Epicurus. And I believe they especially mean that when they repeatedly use the untranslated Greek "ataraxia" instead of explaining what they really think Epicurus meant.

I agree with you that Epicurus himself would not have held that *The main focus was how to live the Good Life and not how to think about the Good Life.*

However, you can't understand what the good life is unless you can explain it in clear terms that lead to correct thought. What I accuse the majority of commentators other than Austin and DeWitt of doing is buying in to the Stoic argument that virtue is either all that matters or the most important thing that matters. In doing so they are implicitly or in many cases explicitly separating thought from action.

I want to make it a part of our conversations on the forum here in 2026 to make this point more explicit as it is leading in my view to some unnecessary confusion.

I think it is a shame that Emily Austin had to write this article, and I think Epicurus himself would be taken aback that something as fundamental as the desire to remain alive so as to experience more pleasure needs to be defended at all. I believe that explains the reaction some have that the article is confusing or poorly focused.

However I am convinced that the article definitely needed to be written, and more like it need to be written. In fact I read Austin's book as an enlargement on the point of the article, which is:

That Epicurean philosophy has been taken over by Stoicisers and synthesizers who do not primarily agree with Epicurus as to the absence of divine designers, as to the absence of life after death, and as to the focus on individual pleasure and pain (widely understood) as the correct ethical guide. These Stoicisers and synthesizers have rendered Epicurus' original focus almost unrecognizable,

That's why it's my number one goal to seek out and emphasize every argument from every source that identifies the core fundamentals of Epicurus and applies them to real life, and strips

away all this incompatible overlay that I do not believe was there in the ancient world.

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As a closing note I'll say that I consider the Nussbaum book to be Exhibit #1 as an illustration of most of what is deeply wrong in modern analysis of Epicurus. I don't recommend anyone read it for assistance in understanding Epicurus at least until they have made themselves aware of the major issues, which is something DeWitt is especially good at explaining. After that it's easy to see why "Therapy of Desire" is one of the favored works of "modern Epicureanism."

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## Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2025 at 7:40 AM

Here's an example from this weeks' podcast text. In [this section of Tusculan Disputations](#) Cicero says, referring to Stoics and those of similar viewpoint who hold that the condition of the mind is all that is important: *What may they not do, who allow nothing to be desirable, nothing to be looked on as good but what is honourable? Let, then, the Peripatetics and old Academics follow my example, and at length leave off muttering to themselves; and openly and with a clear voice let them be bold to say, that a happy life may not be inconsistent with the agonies of Phalaris's bull.*

- Quote

Nor did he take any trouble to provide himself with those remedies which might have enabled him to bear pain; such as firmness of mind, a shame of doing anything base, exercise, and the habit of patience, precepts of courage, and a manly hardiness: but he says that he supports himself on the single recollection of past pleasures, as if any one, when the weather was so hot as that he was scarcely able to bear it, should comfort himself by recollecting that he was once in my country Arpinum, where he was surrounded on every side by cooling streams: for I do not apprehend how past pleasures can allay present evils. But when he says that a wise man is always happy, who would have no right to say so if he were consistent with himself, what may they not do, who allow nothing to be desirable, nothing to be looked on as good but what is honourable? Let, then, the Peripatetics and old Academics follow my example, and at length leave off muttering to themselves; and openly and with a clear voice let them be bold to say, that a happy life may not be inconsistent with the agonies of Phalaris's bull.

The context here is that Cicero is irritated at Epicurus for saying that the wise man is happy even while under torture, because Cicero thinks that Epicureans care about nothing except the pleasures of smooth motion.

It's true that Epicurus doesn't care about anything that does not bring pleasure, but it's not true that Epicurus is happy even while under torture solely because he has the right "attitude" and has learned an intellectual lesson like  $A + B = C$ .

Epicurus is happy under extreme kidney disease because he actively focuses his attention on a set of pleasures that means more to him (his friends and his pleasure at the study of nature) and this gives him something real to say that he can withstand pain X because he has pleasure Y.

This is more than simply the intellectual knowledge that "when I die I cease to exist." There's nothing intrinsically pleasant about that knowledge at all. If you aren't now or haven't in the past pursued pleasures of mind and body that you do or have enjoy, you have nothing to set against pain.

I think that most people reading this here will agree with this viewpoint, but those who value the mind as divine - like Cicero is saying everyone should - disparage the *active pleasures* of the mind and body - because all they care about is "not being disturbed." And when you elevate "not being disturbed" to the goal of the philosophy then you've lost the entire thread of why "pleasure" is important.

The dead are "not disturbed" but that's not the point of life and it's a huge mistake to make it so, but that is implicit on those who can't articulate a good reason to stay alive, which is what Emily Austin is saying some of our most famous modern writers are doing in discussing Epicurus.

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## Post by "Bryan" of December 31, 2025 at 1:16 PM

And, as we have seen, Epicurus wrote a popular, but now lost, letter against the philosopher Stilpo -- and one of the things Stilpo was most known for was the position that only what is in the mind really matters to the wise man.

Seneca (fl. 35<sup>CE</sup>), Letters to Lucilius, 9.18:

"[the wise man] will confine all good within himself and say what that Stilpo said - Stilpo whom a letter of Epicurus attacks -- for this man, with his country captured, his children lost, and his wife gone, yet he came out from the general destruction, alone, and yet happy: to Demetrius who was asking - who had the surname Poliorcetes from the destruction of cities - whether he had lost anything, [Stilpo] said '*all my goods are with me!*' Behold a brave and vigorous man! He conquered the very victory of his enemy. '*I have lost nothing*' [Stilpo] said. he made that

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4843-article-by-dr-emily-austin-epicurus-and-the-politics-of-the-fear-of-death/>

man [i.e., Demetrius] doubt whether he had truly won, *'everything that is mine is with me - Justice, Virtue, Wisdom, and this very thing: to consider nothing good that can be taken away.'*"