

Apollo vs Dionysus - The Philosophical Issues and Where Epicurus Fits In

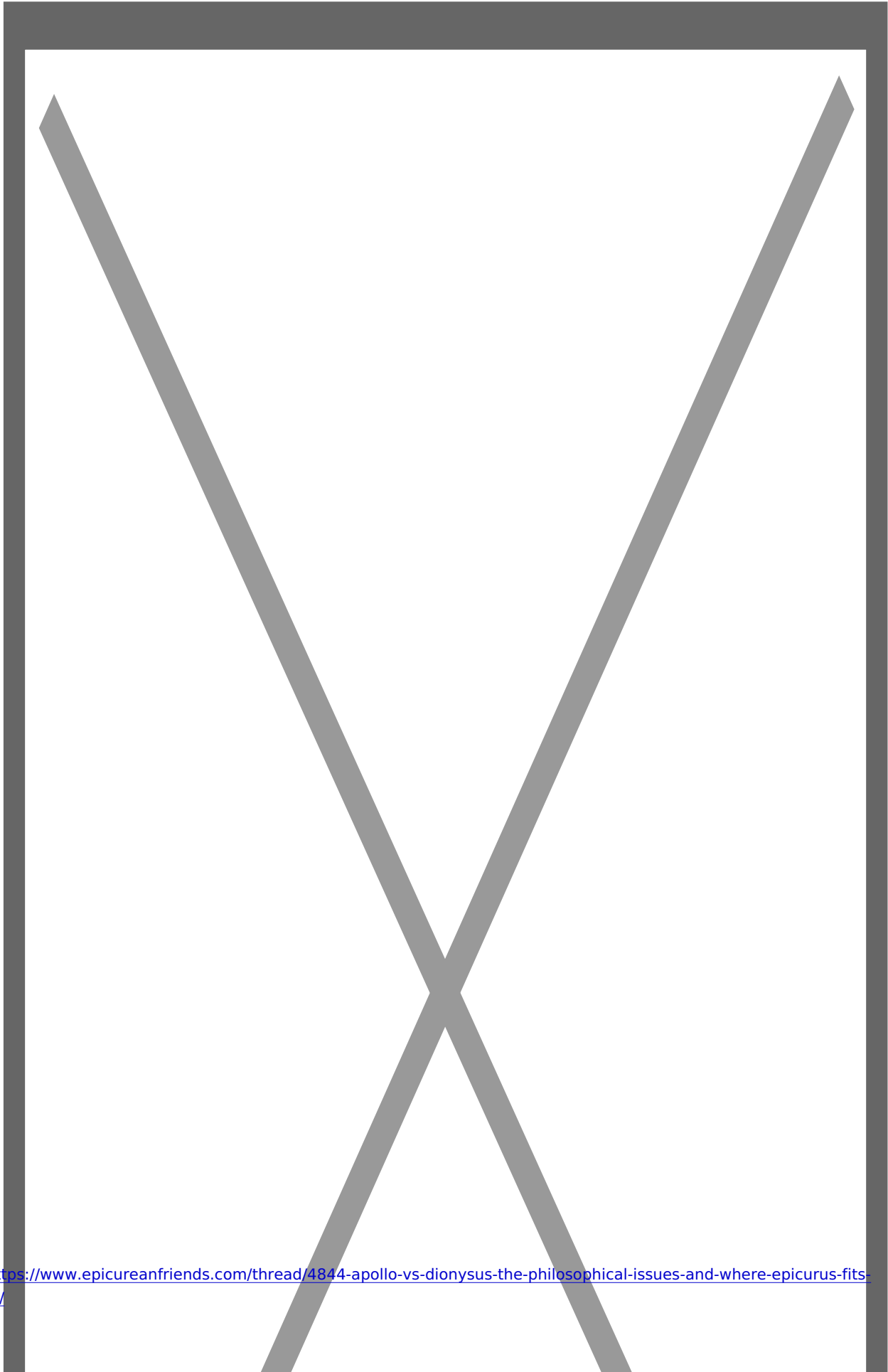
Post by "Cassius" of December 9, 2025 at 8:23 PM

Thanks to Eikadistes for his latest graphic:



This calls to my mind that at least as for me personally I have never come to terms with all the ink that has been spilled in philosophy over the apparent conflict between Apollo and Dionysus or what the controversy is even about apart from very basic allusions about drunkenness.

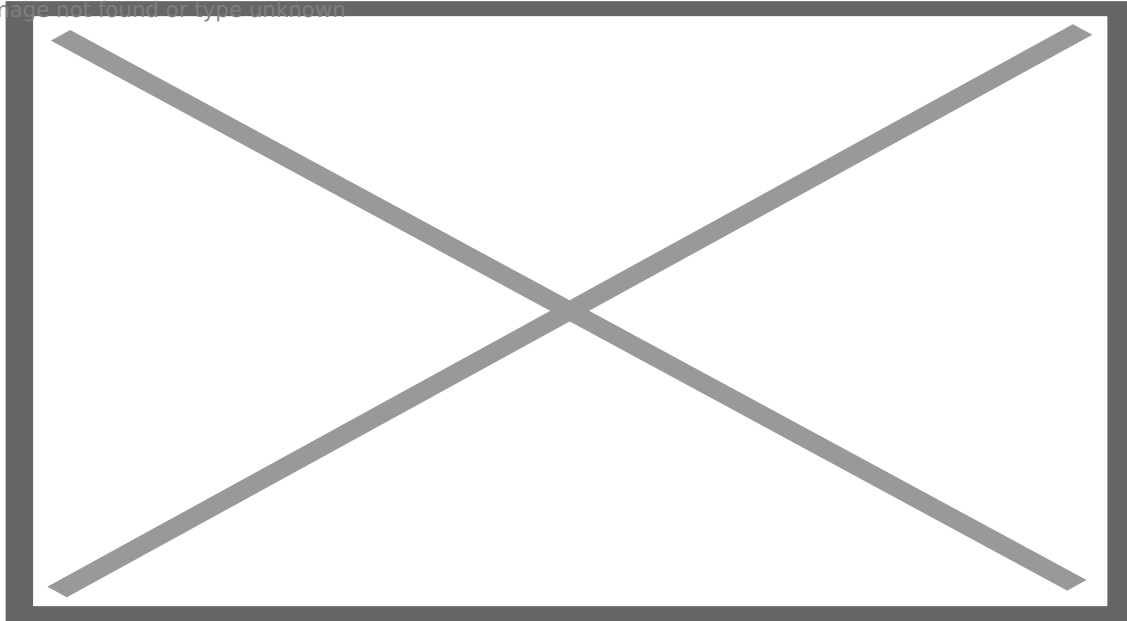
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[Apollonian and Dionysian - Wikipedia](#)

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[Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy: Apollo and Dionysus](#)

It's more complicated than just order and chaos. . .

gregorybsadler.substack.com

I could probably dig into those two articles and come up with something that was satisfactory, but given that there is so much attention paid to this I think it might be worthwhile to discuss what would have been Epicurus' attitude about this controversy. I suspect that he would end up finding something good in both and something also to revise.

If anyone here has reviewed this and has a firm viewpoint on how ancient Epicurean would have viewed this, please post.

Post by "Joshua" of December 9, 2025 at 11:37 PM

I recall we examined this thesis when I was in college, but I haven't got anything insightful to say about it just now. However, this two-part division of culture is interesting to me for another reason, and it is one expressed by Matthew Arnold in his *Culture and Anarchy*, in a section on [Hebraism and Hellenism](#). Here he revisits Tertullian's ancient question: *What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?* And I only just now noticed that in doing so he makes an allusion to Lucretius;

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4844-apollo-vs-dionysus-the-philosophical-issues-and-where-epicurus-fits-in/>

To a world stricken with moral enervation Christianity offered its spectacle of an inspired self-sacrifice; to men who refused themselves nothing, it showed one who refused himself everything; — "my Saviour banished joy" says George Herbert. When the **alma Venus**, the life-giving and joy-giving power of nature, so fondly cherished by the Pagan world, could not save her followers from self-dissatisfaction and ennui, the severe words of the apostle came bracingly and refreshingly: "Let no man deceive you with vain words, for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience".

Nietzsche it seems will have resented much of what Arnold panegyricized, but I will have to review *The Birth of Tragedy* before saying too much about the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

Post by "Cassius" of December 10, 2025 at 8:02 AM

I remember reading this [Ayn Rand essay](#) on the topic many years ago. I'm sure today I would side with Nietzsche's assessment with which Rand disagrees, but these paragraphs probably help make what is being debated more clear:

Quote

The issue in this case is the alleged dichotomy of reason versus emotion. This dichotomy has been presented in many variants in the history of philosophy, but its most colorfully eloquent statement was given by Friedrich Nietzsche.

In *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche claims that he observed two opposite elements in Greek tragedies, which he saw as metaphysical principles inherent in the nature of reality. He named them after two Greek gods: Apollo, the god of light, and Dionysus, the god of wine.

Apollo, in Nietzsche's metaphysics, is the symbol of beauty, order, wisdom, efficacy—though Nietzsche equivocates about this last—that is, the symbol of reason. Dionysus is the symbol of drunkenness or, rather, Nietzsche cites drunkenness as his identification of what Dionysus stands for: wild, primeval feelings, orgiastic joy, the dark, the savage, the unintelligible element in man; that is, the symbol of emotion.

Apollo, according to Nietzsche, is a necessary element, but an unreliable and thus inferior guide to existence that gives man a superficial view of reality: the illusion of an orderly universe. Dionysus is the free, unfettered spirit that offers man—by means of a mysterious intuition induced by wine and drugs—a more profound vision of a different

kind of reality, and is thus the superior.

And, indicating that Nietzsche knew clearly what he was talking about, even though he chose to express it in a safely, drunkenly Dionysian manner, Apollo represents the principle of individuality, while Dionysus leads man, quote, "into complete self-forgetfulness," unquote, and into merging with the "oneness" of nature. Those who, at a superficial reading, take Nietzsche to be an advocate of individualism, please note.

This much is true: reason is the faculty of an individual, to be exercised individually; and it is only dark, irrational emotions, obliterating his mind, that can enable a man to melt, merge and dissolve into a mob or a tribe. We may accept Nietzsche's symbols, but not his estimate of their respective values, nor the metaphysical necessity of a reason/emotion dichotomy.

It is not true that reason and emotion are irreconcilable antagonists or that emotions are a wild, unknowable, ineffable element in men. But this is what emotions become for those who do not care to know what they feel, and who attempt to subordinate reason to their emotions. For every variant of such attempts—as well as for their consequences—the image of Dionysus is an appropriate symbol.

Symbolic figures are a valuable adjunct to philosophy. They help men to integrate and bear in mind the essential meaning of complex issues. Apollo and Dionysus represent the fundamental conflict of our age. And for those who may regard them as floating abstractions, reality has offered two perfect, fiction-like dramatizations of these abstract symbols—at Cape Kennedy and at Woodstock.

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I haven't re-read the rest of that essay but I do think it's true that the subject of whether there is a conflict between Apollo vs Dionysus and how to frame it is of relevance to how we explain Epicurus.