

My personal, cursory interpretation of Epicurus. Please feel free to correct me.

Post by “Daniel188” of December 22, 2025 at 2:56 PM

Hello everyone!

I'm writing this post to correct some of my views on Epicureanism. I'll list some of my interpretations here and hope that others will look at them and critique them to point out any errors. I won't claim to have a thorough understanding here, as I haven't read much yet. My vocabulary may also not be necessarily precise, as English is not my first language.

I'll list my basic thoughts so far:

1. According to Epicurus, we acquire knowledge through our senses; prolepses and sensations are the criteria for cognition.
2. Sometimes it may seem that your senses are wrong. For example, being far from a building, we will think it is much smaller than it actually is. But this doesn't change the fact that what we see is "real." Every such impression is true, but our interpretation may be incorrect.
3. Prolepses are preliminary concepts that we develop based on repeated impressions. When we repeatedly experience a given phenomenon (e.g., fire), our mind creates a lasting image of it (prolepsis). I believe the Epicureans believe that some prolepsis is innate, meaning it doesn't stem solely from experience but is naturally built into human beings.
4. Feelings concern pleasure and pain. They serve to evaluate what to strive for and what to avoid.
5. We can only obtain relatively reliable knowledge using these categories. This implies that when we study the world, we should study it "as it is" without adding ideas that we cannot observe using these three categories of knowledge.
6. Other philosophical schools also used logic in their theories of knowledge. However, logic itself does not accurately reflect the real world. Logic can examine coherence, but words are not reality. They can describe reality, but only if they describe something confirmed by the canon. Nature takes precedence, and reason is secondary.
7. In his studies of nature and during his education with various teachers, Epicurus concluded that these criteria were true, and this led to his support for atomism.

8. According to Epicurus, the universe is composed of atoms and the void. This is contrary to, for example, Stoic concepts.

9. Epicurus's physical theories imply that there is no possibility of supernatural Gods existing, nor that the world is intentionally controlled in any way.

10. Since Epicureanism is an old philosophy and Epicurus himself did not have access to modern research tools, he may have been wrong about some things, but I will leave this topic aside for now as it is not my strong suit. For example, I do not understand the concept of "deviation."

11. The idea that there are no supernatural Gods in our world and the ideas of the canon of knowledge have their consequences.

12. One of these consequences is Epicurus's recognition that Gods exist, but they exist within the material world and are material. They are not the creators of the universe. According to Epicurus, the gods are higher beings who, because they are in a state of perfect ataraxia (a state of undisturbed pleasure), are not interested in what humans do.

13. Assuming that the gods are interested in humans would be impious, as it would imply that lower beings could somehow anger the gods or influence them.

14. It is also impossible for what we call "soul" to survive death. Since everything is material, "soul" is also material and is, in a sense, a body. There is no duality between spirit and body, there is no ghost in the machine. Therefore, death is the end of consciousness and all sensation.

15. Considering this, a useful thing we can do is simply recognize the gods as models of a pleasant life and accept our own mortality without fear. We have nothing to fear because after death, we will feel no pain. What we should do is make the most of this short time of life and spend it pleasantly.

16. Epicurus places pleasure as the goal of the good life. Pleasure characterized by ataraxia, or freedom from pain.

17. One reason that pleasure should be a goal is that we choose pleasure for its own sake. We don't need to logically justify the pursuit of pleasure. That it is good for us simply follows from our natural constitution, just as pain is bad.

18. Some might argue that pleasure cannot be a goal and might set as a goal something abstract, such as virtue or some ideal unsupported by pleasure.

19. Such ideals are in themselves subjective and vague. They exist only in the sphere of human thought, but do not exist tangibly in nature. They can be accepted, but their justification is no higher or nobler than taking pleasure as a goal. This is because the world is morally neutral.

There are no Platonic ideals of objective goodness that we can discover.

20. Since such idealistic ideals are vague and essentially subjective, just like pleasure, it's better to choose pleasure. By choosing pleasure, we can at least be sure that we won't end up badly because pleasure, by its very nature, makes us feel good, while idealistic ideals can lead us to pain that has no value. This way, we can waste our lives. Furthermore, pursuing pleasure makes it easier to calculate our actions, as opposed to pursuing abstractions, because by focusing on abstractions, we don't have such a hard criterion.

21. By focusing on abstractions, we become bogged down in logical and dialectical considerations, never achieving certainty. This is evident in how people can argue passionately about whether someone is "good" or "bad." Two different people can have two different perspectives on what is "virtuous," and if we ourselves strive for virtue, we must take these considerations into account since we treat virtue as an absolute. Ultimately, we will have trouble determining what to do.

22. So, pleasure is the goal. Pleasure, understood very broadly. Epicurus categorized all sensations as either pleasant or painful.

23. But of course, we know well that not every pleasure should always be chosen. Every pleasure is good, but some are not worth choosing because of their consequences.

24. In this case, Epicurus distinguishes a certain virtue, which is a tool for pursuing this goal. This virtue is prudence. Prudence consists of skillful calculation when making decisions. It consists of the ability to recognize the consequences of our choice, in the sense of whether it will bring us more pleasure than pain. This virtue is even more important than philosophy itself, because it leads to a happy life.

25. The doctrine of ataraxia is also useful in thinking about pleasure. Ataraxia is a state of undisturbed well-being, free from physical and mental pain. It is useful because it allows us to examine our state and shows the limits of pleasure. It allows us to examine our state by directing us to reflect on what causes us pain. If we know which desires cause us pain (that is, interfere with our ataraxia), we can satisfy or suppress them depending on the circumstances and the nature of the desire.

26. In striving for ataraxia, categorizing desires is useful, indeed crucial. Epicurus divided desires into natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, and unnatural and unnecessary.

27. Categorizing desires can probably be explained as a technique for placing desires on a spectrum. A spectrum that measures how necessary and easily achievable specific desires are to achieve a state of ataraxia. One end of this spectrum are natural and necessary desires. These are desires that cannot be suppressed and are most effective in alleviating pain. At the other end of this spectrum are unnatural and unnecessary desires, which are unattainable because they have no limits and cannot alleviate pain.

28. Right in the middle between these two categories are natural and non-necessary desires, which are largely more luxurious versions of natural and necessary desires. These can be chosen if the option is available and not associated with negative consequences (or when these negative consequences are acceptable), but when planning one's life, it's worth ensuring the possibility of satisfying these natural and necessary desires. Because natural and necessary desires are what most reduce pain, they should be prioritized.

29. Which category a desire falls into depends on the context and individual preferences. Typically, however, to significantly minimize pain, one needs food, water, shelter, friendship, and safety. If an individual is able to fulfill these basic needs, they have already largely eliminated pain.

30. Epicureanism also has something to say about interpersonal relationships. Epicurus said that one cannot live pleasantly without living justly.

31. Justice, according to Epicurus, is not absolute and is simply a covenant not to harm and not to be harmed. Depending on the circumstances, what is just can change.

32. Being just is beneficial because it allows us to develop friendships and live in community with others without fear. Epicurus also notes that by engaging in unjust actions, we can always be detected and exposed to retaliation. This creates fear and disrupts ataraxia. Therefore, it is usually better to adhere to the law and avoid harming others.

33. It is also worth noting that harming others is often done to satisfy unnatural and unnecessary desires. For example, people may harm others to gain wealth, glory, or power. These are desires without limits, where appetite grows with eating. These desires do not minimize pain and are generally easy to suppress.

34. It's also worth noting that when striving for ataraxia, we often have to choose pain to obtain pleasure. We shouldn't fear all pain. For example, friendships will often involve some form of pain, but usually there are far more pleasures, and the impact on overall mental well-being can be profound. Relieving the pain of loneliness is worth the pain of some short-term inconveniences resulting from interpersonal relationships.

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2025 at 3:50 PM

Wow that is very detailed and well thought out. Thanks for posting. I have just a couple of initial comments on first reading:

1. You appear to me the type of person to whom the DeWitt book would appeal and be very valuable. If you don't have it I hope you will get it.

[Quote from Daniel188](#)

16. Epicurus places pleasure as the goal of the good life. Pleasure characterized by ataraxia, or freedom from pain

The sentence or phrase "pleasure characterized by ataraxia or freedom from pain" I would say will need lots of elaboration because I would argue that all pleasure "is" absence of pain and placing "ataraxia in a central role without elaboration can lead to very dangerous tangents. Nature gives us only pleasure and pain, not ataraxia.

[Quote from Daniel188](#)

18. Some might argue that pleasure cannot be a goal and might set as a goal something abstract, such as virtue or some ideal unsupported by pleasure

Yes. I have personally modified my terminology over time to place less negative connotation on "abstractions" but I do think it is valuable to think about in terms of what is "real".

[Quote from Daniel188](#)

21. By focusing on abstractions, we become bogged down in logical and dialectical considerations, never achieving certainty. This is evident in how people can argue passionately about whether someone is "good" or "bad." Two different people can have two different perspectives on what is "virtuous," and if we ourselves strive for virtue, we must take these considerations into account since we treat virtue as an absolute. Ultimately, we will have trouble determining what to do

Same comment as above. Abstractions formed properly are very important and even necessary. Epicurean philosophy itself is an abstraction. It's probably more a question of how the abstractions is formed than the fact of being an abstraction.

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As indicated above I would now say that the better term for the goal is happiness or eudaemonia or Felicity and not ataraxia or even aponia. One of the most clear examples to use to consider that is that Epicurus said his last days were among his happiest but he was not without pain or disturbance. And if he has held "absence of disturbance" to be his primary directive he would have stayed home and tended a fig garden instead of leading a revolutionary philosophical movement that challenged every power structure of his day.

Thanks for posting!

Post by "Daniel188" of December 22, 2025 at 4:29 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

1. You appear to me the type of person to whom the DeWitt book would appeal and be very valuable. If you don't have it I hope you will get it.

I will try to get this book. Thank you.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I agree. My perspective is that you can't have ataraxia without pleasure. In his letter to Menoiceus, Epicurus states that there are only two feelings: pain and pleasure. If we eliminate pain, we automatically achieve pleasure. Pain is then the body's demand for pleasure. For example, if our head itches, we feel the pain of desire, which tells us to scratch it. By eliminating this pain by scratching, we automatically derive pleasure from it.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I actually hadn't thought this through. I was more referring to abstract goals that aren't grounded in feelings. Let's look at virtues in the Stoic sense, for example. It's really difficult to figure out what "virtuous action" means specifically without considering some hard touchstone, like pleasure. An Epicurean essentially arrives at these things on their own because they know exactly how they feel. Feelings are subjective, so to a large extent, different people can lead happy lives in different ways. This doesn't bother an Epicurean because they don't see their lifestyle as something absolute to which everyone must conform, but as something personal.

The situation is different for people who choose, for example, virtue as a goal. If virtue is a goal, then one can assume that one should act in some objectively determined way, determined by logic, and everyone should act accordingly. And this is where conflicts arise between different groups, arguing about how to act in accordance with virtue. If you're someone who takes such a goal seriously, you must consider all opinions and try to think them through so as not to accidentally stray and pursue vice instead of virtue. In such a case, you can be left confused and unsure whether you're doing good or bad.

An Epicurean has a clear goal and can easily measure it through their feelings. If the result of their actions is pleasure, they're certain they're doing good; if the result is pain, they know they're doing bad and don't need to spend much time pondering theoretical definitions of virtue or abstract good.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I'll have to think about this. What you're saying sounds reasonable. It's probably more accurate to talk about happiness or eudaimonia. Thank you for your answer.

Post by "Cassius" of December 22, 2025 at 6:18 PM

In regard to the DeWitt book as you read around the forum you will find varying opinions about it. I don't agree with everything he has to say either, but the reason I recommend it is that he gives a sweeping overview of the full picture, especially as to how it relates to Platonism. Most

of the other resources we have are much more narrowly focused, and while they are often superior on their areas of focus, they don't do as well at integrating the issues of physics and canonics that the books on ethics tend to omit.

[Quote from Daniel188](#)

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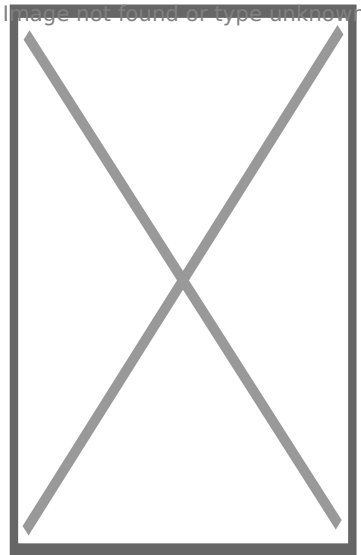
Well said and I think very true.

Post by "Don" of December 23, 2025 at 6:59 AM

[Quote from Daniel188](#)

I will try to get this book. Thank you.

It available on Internet Archive



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