

Tim O'Keefe -- Ouch!

Post by "Pacatus" of March 10, 2026 at 1:33 PM

"Most of the empirical claims Epicurus made about the world – some fundamental to his system, others peripheral – have since been falsified. ... So it is not surprising that *the philosophical system of Epicureanism has **no adherents today.***" (!?) 🤔 [Tim O'Keefe, Epicureanism; 2014, Routledge.]

Ouch! 😞 😡 I thought I'd take another look at O'Keefe's introduction – but I think I'll just shut it down there (though I'm sure there's some good stuff in it as well). No ancient philosophy is unaffected by advances in empirical knowledge, but the core principles of Epicureanism remain intact. And O'Keefe's claim about "no adherents" is just false – as this on-line Garden clearly demonstrates.

I revisit introductory texts from time to time – but I'll stick with the likes of, e.g., Emily Austin and Catherine Wilson.

[Yes, I do tend toward a bit of eclecticism (I don't know – for myself – how to otherwise personalize any of this stuff in my daily life, and keep an inquiring mind) – but, I think of Epicurus as the core (why I keep coming back to it), with a bit of eclecticism around the edges. Which I try 😊 not to impose on discussions here – sometimes I fail. 😭]

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2026 at 2:26 PM

Yes and thank you for this post. This is good information to keep on hand. Tim O'Keefe has written some very good stuff on Epicurus, but this part of his attitude has to be kept in mind. This situation reminds me of Cyril Bailey, whose work is extremely helpful to us, but who personally assessed Epicurus perhaps in even more negative terms than does O'Keefe here.

Here, the main problem is that he's not even trying to be open-minded about the big picture. As O'Keefe well knows, Epicurus was not a technician. It's clear from Epicurus' arguments that he's basing his positions on a combination of logic AND observation. The terminology used to describe "atoms" matters only to the extent that the point is that there is at SOME point a limit of divisibility. It's totally ridiculous to talk as if just because Epicurus used different terminology than we do now that we should throw out everything he had to say. The point is the ultimate one: We don't live forever and we know everything and we never will, so what do we

expect the truth to be based on the best information at our disposal?

The big-picture conclusions are that there is nothing outside or above nature, no human life after death, and no universal ideas or moral absolutes. Those conclusions are absolutely valid today. That's the level at which Epicurus was focusing his attention, and it's ridiculous to pretend that Epicurus was doing anything else. Protons and electrons and neutrons are not big-picture conclusions. The big-picture conclusions are that everything operates *naturally and without supernatural guidance*, and the simple fact that we are alive doesn't give us the ability to dictate to nature what we think might be or should be the way things are.

All this is a matter of being reasonable and charitable in assessing the big picture. No doubt it's possible to take that statement from O'Keefe and excuse it and say O'Keefe meant it in a limited way. After all, if O'Keefe really thought that everything Epicurus had to say was obsolete, it's unlikely that O'Keefe would have devoted so much of his career to talking about Epicurus.

Perspective is the problem we're constantly confronting. We always need to focus on the big picture and never get so lost in details that we lose sight of the real take-away.

We really need to ask every writer: Where do THEY stand on whether there are supernatural forces? Where do THEY stand on life after death? Where do THEY stand on whether the same laws should apply in Rome and Athens vs Jerusalem, and at all times past present and future? If a writer can't clearly communicate that they agree that there are no supernatural forces, that there is no life after death, and that morality and justice is contextual and not absolute, then whatever else they might be they are not in a trustworthy position to provide leadership in Epicurean philosophy.

Examining people on motives is what we do in court with Experts. Lawyers' cross-examine experts to determine how much they were paid for their opinions, and about other opinions those experts have given in other cases. Everyone brings their own biases and prejudices when they give opinions, and I don't see a better way to make decisions than we do in court. Bring to every question a sweeping and thorough examination not just of what the "expert" says is the truth, but also examine the biases and prejudices of the expert, and then in the end let each listener draw their own conclusion. In judging their credibility on interpreting Epicurus, it's important to know that Bailey was highly critical of Epicurus' conclusions about ethics, and that O'Keefe has a problem with Epicurus' approach to physics.

There's no perfect system and no guarantee of success, but at least examining backgrounds and motives allows for the possibility of success, and it doesn't allow for bias and prejudice to gain a totally impregnable hold on everyone.

Of course when I approach a complicated subject I want information from experts to help me form my conclusion. But when it's a matter of life and death and I need brain surgery, it's relevant to know whether the surgeon has some personal motivation to do his best to help me, or whether he is motivated to hate my guts.

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 11, 2026 at 7:47 AM

Regarding a lack of followers, as well as eclecticism...we are really just getting started with unpacking the system presented by Epicurus, based on the extant remains. And, a big challenge is updating the philosophy to make it compatible for modern thinkers (and science). There are many aspects of Epicurean philosophy that are greatly needed in our modern times. Religion has caused numerous problems for the world, and may end up causing the downfall of civilization, because of its harmful aspects -- mainly the refusal to see how making contracts for peace between countries is the only avenue of peace (but since they all are looking forward to something better in heaven then they give up on "Project Earth"). Also, the idea that God causes tests/trials of suffering so that people can "grow" (found in both Christianity and Islam) - this is harmful because it justifies causing suffering to others, since God himself causes suffering. The problem though, is that there is something about civilization that is struggling to "get past God". So Epicurean philosophy which holds that gods/God is not interactive with the world or listening to prayers may appeal to some, but not appeal to others.

And about eclecticism, I think it would be good to take a look at what people feel is missing in Epicureanism, and what they are looking for when seeking out "eclecticism" - in other words...Making a list of what of modern concerns (both psychological and philosophical) does Epicureanism cover, and what does it not cover.

Post by “Cassius” of March 11, 2026 at 8:07 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

And, a big challenge is updating the philosophy to make it compatible for modern thinkers (and science).

"Modern thinkers" are in many cases the problem, not the solution, and you can't make opposites compatible. It would be more accurate to say that it is desirable to use new methods and technologies to explain to such "modern thinkers" as are open to the discussion the superiority of the Epicurean viewpoint.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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That's not the "only" avenue for peace. When people refuse to agree, they can fight and in some cases successfully eliminate the other side. It doesn't help the situation to imagine otherwise - thinking this only makes it more likely that it is YOUR side that is going to be eliminated. That's why Epicurus regularly says that all means necessary to preserve your safety are a natural good, and that some people can and do refuse to enter agreements of mutual safety.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

So Epicurean philosophy which holds that gods/God is not interactive with the world or listening to prayers may appeal to some, but not appeal to others.

That is a fact that always has proven to be the case, and likely will continue to prove to be the case. And therefore those who think as we do have to take all appropriate steps to make sure that we are not eliminated. We've come far too close to exactly that result over the last 2000 years.

Post by “DavidN” of March 11, 2026 at 11:32 AM

I think o'keefe is making the same mistake as many enlightenment thinkers, I see the pleonachōs tropos (πλεοναχῶς τρόπος) as a precursor of modern evergreen policies, adaptable to changing information landscapes. To say that his theories have been falsified is ignoring a key concept of the canon. And to say that he has few modern followers ignores his systemic impact on the modern world, in the West we live in a world built on Epicurus philosophies.

Post by “Cassius” of March 11, 2026 at 11:42 AM

And it's good to hear from you DavidN!

Post by “DaveT” of March 11, 2026 at 2:33 PM

I see evidence that Epicurean teachings are far more widespread than many think it to be. Epicurus' name is not attached to the actions and beliefs of people, especially in western, educated, Industrialized, rich, democracies (WEIRD). Just listen to any marketing of medical providers and pharmaceuticals, and you hear reduction of pain and suffering as a goal that can be achieved. The same for psychiatric and counseling practices. There's no grin and bear it there. Listen to mindful presentations and note they teach recognizing the good in yourself and others. There's no demand to achieve certain virtues. Heck, I'll bet money that even preachers forced to preach to dwindling numbers of congregations emphasize compassion and understanding rather than be good and guarantee heaven or face hell. I think the world will give up more classical stoicism and absolutism in practice. By the way, they don't know the basis of those in the ancient Greeks. I see Epicurean beliefs as unstoppable. Without the cudgel of fear of damnation or afterlife, Epicurean thought can't compete head to head with major religions. It carries no threat of irredeemable error for denial of the faith. For that reason, it will continue to grow, slowly, beyond our lifetimes and even then, it can only be expected to be a large influence rather than a monolithic belief system.

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 12, 2026 at 11:04 AM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

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[Quote from DaveT](#)

I see Epicurean beliefs as unstoppable.

I think that the term "Epicurean" can't be applied to someone who only has one single concept that they follow which might be considered "Epicurean". Epicureanism is a collection of specific concepts that guide one's outlook and choices.

This illustrates an on-going problem with speaking about "Epicureanism" -- how it is understood, what does it represent, what is "Epicureanism" and what isn't "Epicureanism" and who do we consider as "being Epicurean" - these questions will be answered differently depending on whom you ask. And the only way to begin to deal with this is to start labeling all

of the common varying interpretations.

Here is an example: You could call something "Torquatian Epicureanism" or "Herodotian Epicureanism" or "[PD08](#) Epicureanism" or "[PD26](#) Epicureanism" etc, etc, (minimalists, maximalists, etc.)...depending on how things are interpreted.

Also, of importance is a list of "Epicurean beliefs", which would be within various outlines of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by “DavidN” of March 12, 2026 at 11:54 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And it's good to hear from you DavidN!

Ya taking a break from my project, figured I'd come see how everyone is doing.

Post by “Pacatus” of March 12, 2026 at 1:30 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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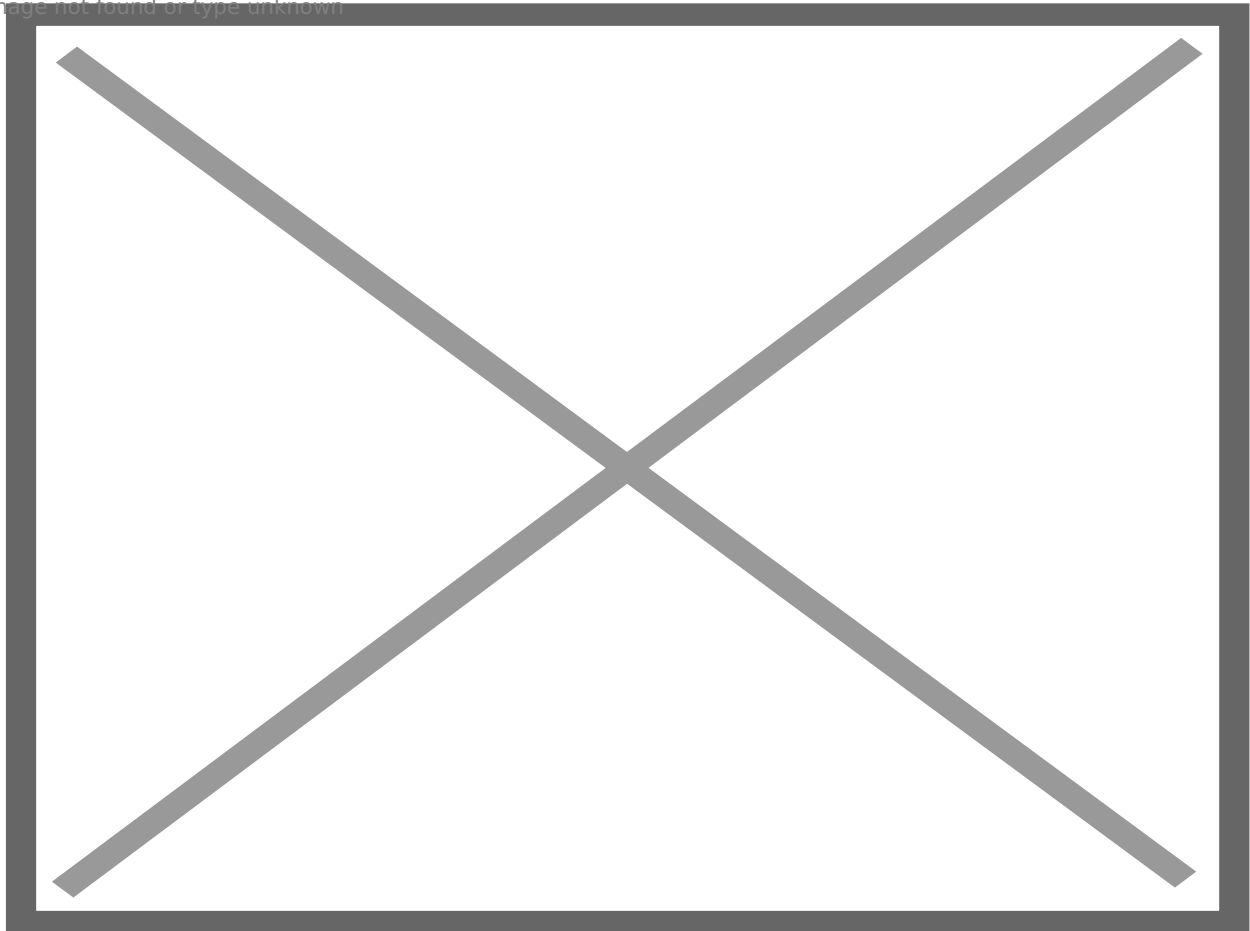
Your “no cookie-cutter” comment in another thread is certainly spot on, and I like the approach you’re suggesting here.

As a - likely beyond-the-pale whimsical* - metaphor, perhaps we could think in terms of a philosophical “clade”:

“In biology, a clade (/kleɪd/) (from Ancient Greek κλάδος (kládos) 'branch'), also known as a monophyletic group or natural group, is a group of organisms that is composed of a common ancestor and all of its descendants. Clades are the fundamental unit of cladistics, a modern approach to taxonomy adopted by most biological fields.

“The common ancestor may be an individual, a population, or a species (extinct or extant). Clades are nested, one in another, as each branch in turn splits into smaller branches. These splits reflect evolutionary history as populations diverged and evolved independently. Clades are termed monophyletic (Greek: "one clan") groups.”

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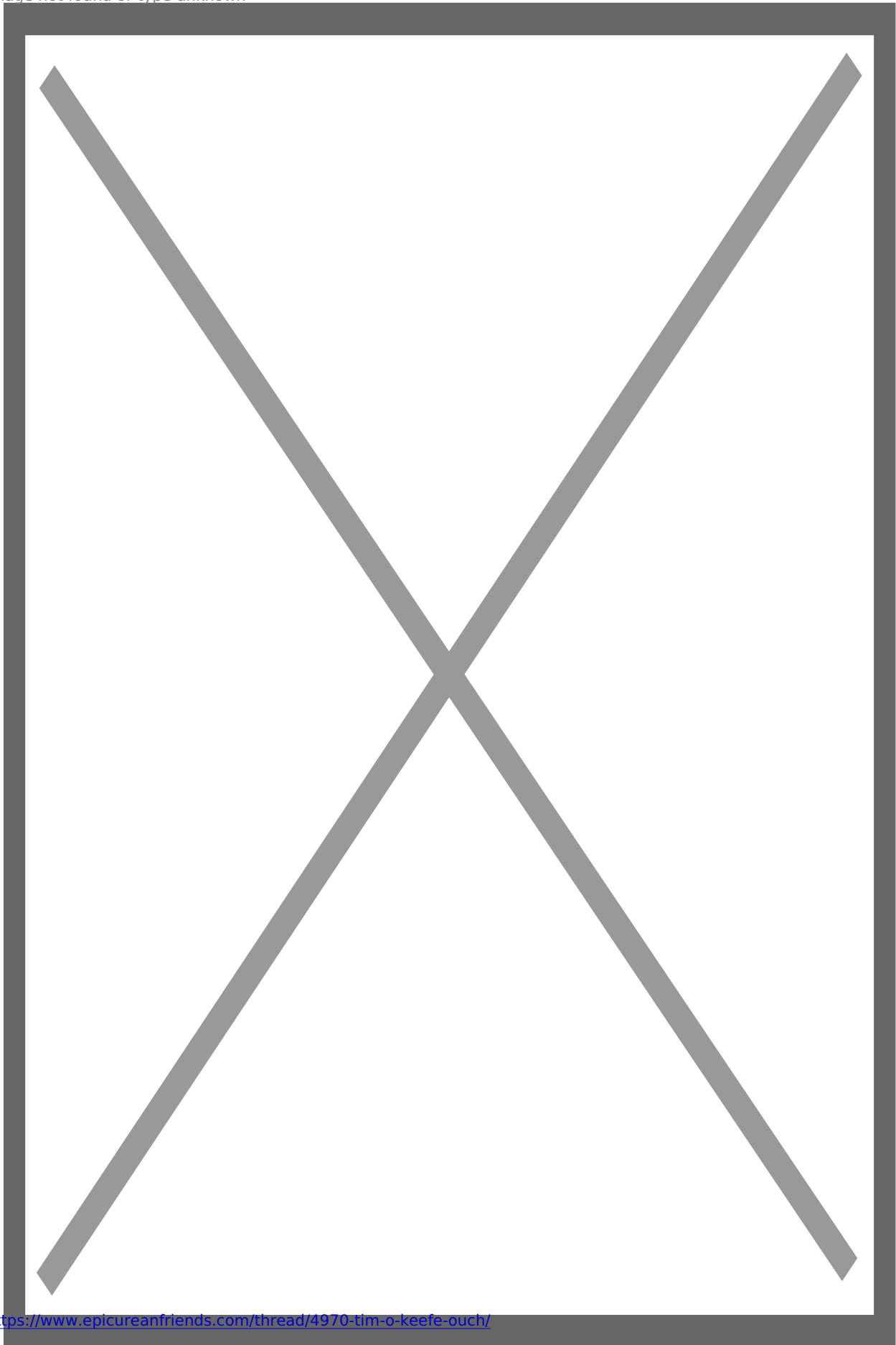
[Clade - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

For example, bees: “Bees are winged insects that form a monophyletic clade Anthophila within the superfamily Apoidea of the order Hymenoptera, with over 20,000 known species in seven recognized families.”

Within that bee clade, are a variety of behavior characteristics: “Some species – including honey bees, bumblebees, and stingless bees – are social insects living in highly hierarchical colonies, while over 90% of bee species – including mason bees, carpenter bees, leafcutter bees, and sweat bees – are solitary.” But all bees (as opposed to, say, wasps) “are herbivores that specifically feed on nectar (nectarivory) and pollen (palynivory), the former primarily as a carbohydrate source for metabolic energy, and the latter primarily for protein and other nutrients for their larvae.”

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[Bee - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

Recent research suggests that even hive bees – at least bumblebees – also, as individuals, *play*.

* By way of apology, I might be reacting to this from Emily Austin that I read yesterday: “Our ability to live a good life does not rise or fall with cultural refinement or rarified intellectual skills, and sometimes it’s just more fun to clown around.” It reminded me of something Alan Watts once said to the effect that being sincere is not the same thing as being hyper-serious. As Epicurus said, we must also laugh – even whilst doing philosophy. Then again, the metaphor of a “philosophical clade” might be constructive ...