

Innovations/Updates in Epicurus Philosophy

Post by “Matteng” of April 18, 2026 at 7:16 AM

Hi,

in one of Hiram's essays about the 4. criterion of the Canon he mentions rules for Innovations or Updating the Philosophy. I like the idea so that it can evolve with new data and scientific findings.

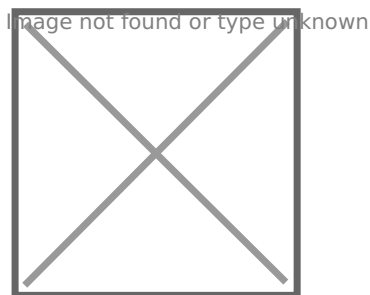
What do you think about it ? Has someone direct quotes for that ?

What would Epicurean Philosophy look like when Epicurus would live today or when the garden/school had evolved until today ?

Which basic principles are close to be „timeless“ or “hardcore“ ?

The essay:

„... In order to avoid cognitive dissonance and the muddying of his doctrines, the Hegemon left instructions regarding innovation, as reported by Michael Erler in the second chapter of the book Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition. Epicurus established two criteria for innovation: akolythia (“that which follows”, which requires that the innovation have internal consistency) and symphonia—meaning that the innovation could not contradict the evidence of nature or any of the established doctrines of the school...”



[On the Fourth Criterion of the Canon](#)

To fully understand this essay, first read the Study Guide for the Epicurean Canon.
open.substack.com

Post by “Joshua” of April 18, 2026 at 4:18 PM

Excellent question, [Matteng!](#)

Regarding the fourth criterion of the canon, I will simply point the way to Prof. David Glidden's [Epicurean Prolepsis](#). It won't furnish any answers, but in it he does attempt to explain why the question itself is extremely confusing, and why we should tread carefully.

Regarding the passage you have quoted from Hiram's essay, we have direct evidence of this method in the [Letter to Pythocles](#):

Quote

[95] for in our own experience we see many things which shine by their own light and many also which shine by borrowed light. And none of the celestial phenomena stand in the way, if only we always keep in mind the **method of plural explanation** and the several **consistent** assumptions and causes, instead of dwelling on what is **inconsistent** and giving it a false importance so as always to fall back in one way or another upon the single explanation. The appearance of the face in the moon may equally well arise from interchange of parts, or from interposition of something, or in any other of the ways which might be seen to **accord** with the facts.

[95] καὶ γὰρ παρ' ἡμῖν θεωρεῖται πολλὰ μὲν ἐξ ἑαυτῶν ἔχοντα, πολλὰ δὲ ἀφ' ἐτέρων. καὶ οὐθὲν ἐμποδοστατεῖ τῶν ἐν τοῖς μετεώροις φαινομένων, ἐάν τις τοῦ **πλεοναχοῦ τρόπου** ἀεὶ μνήμην ἔχη καὶ τὰς **ἀκολούθους** αὐτοῖς ὑποθέσεις ἅμα καὶ αἰτίας συνθεωρῇ καὶ μὴ ἀναβλέπων εἰς τὰ **ἀνακόλουθα** ταῦτ' ὀγκοῖ ματαίως καὶ καταρρέπη ἄλλοτε ἄλλως ἐπὶ τὸν μοναχὸν τρόπον. ἡ δὲ ἔμφασις τοῦ προσώπου ἐν αὐτῇ δύναται μὲν γίνεσθαι καὶ κατὰ παραλλαγὴν μερῶν καὶ κατ' ἐπιπροσθέτησιν, καὶ ὅσοι ποτ' ἂν τρόποι θεωροῖντο τὸ **σύμφωνον** τοῖς φαινομένοις κεκτημένοι.

The word translated as *method* in this passage is *τρόπος*, *trope*, or *way*. **The way of manifold explanation**; when confronted with a strange new phenomenon (φαινομένων), one should begin by considering the various natural *hypotheses* (ὑποθέσεις) or potential *causes* (αἰτίας) that might possibly have given rise to the phenomenon. These potential explanations must harmonize with sense perception, and also with known facts. All of this is in contrast to **the way of the single explanation**, which constitutes an arbitrary selection of one possible explanation to the exclusion of all others.

It's important to remember that the purpose of this exercise is not to develop a robust or rigorous scientific explanation for every phenomenon. The purpose is to eradicate fear. For example; are bolts of lightning hurled down by Zeus in order to punish hubris, as in the myth of Phaeton? There is no reason to think so; that is just one possible explanation, and that particular explanation isn't even a good one. As Lucretius notes ([book 2, line ~1100](#)), thunderbolts are often seen to strike the temples of Olympian Zeus himself. The explanation, in other words, does not accord with known facts.

Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2026 at 4:23 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

in one of Hiram's essays about the 4. criterion of the Canon he mentions rules for Innovations or Updating the Philosophy.

This is one of the basic differences between Hiram's approach and that which I set out to accomplish here in forming EpicureanFriends. Our focus is on understanding the philosophy as it was originally taught, which we are all including me very far from doing, not attempting to account for every "what-about" that has occurred over the last two thousand years.

We inevitably do some of that here and i don't see anything wrong with some amount of discussion on this, and I have a lot of respect for Hiram personally and for his enthusiasm for Epicurus.

However I do want to say that it's likely I'm going to moderate this thread to keep it from getting out of hand and distracting us from our core mission. For an example of how that can happen, we still have on the forum [one of our longest threads from many years ago](#) when we attempted (and failed) to hammer out a common approach on how to "organize" our efforts. I encourage people on the forum now to read over that thread because it's a very interesting discussion of how people can be generally on the same team but see game plans very differently.

Those who are really interested in pursuing "Neo-Epicureanism" - which is against one of our most clear site rules, should pursue that at Reddit or some other location. I wish them well in doing so, but this is not the place to pursue that in the way that some would like.

Again I'll say that a general discussion is probably ok. But everyone who wants to talk about some aspect of Physics needing to be updated is in my opinion mainly displaying that they do not yet understand Epicurus' approach to physics, which focuses on ultimate conceptual issues (e.g. infinite divisibility) rather than contemporary opinions on limited data. That is exactly the reason for our rule against pursuing "neo-Epicureanism."

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Which basic principles are close to be „timeless“ or “hardcore“ ?

That's what we pursue in discussion about the principles which are listed on the front page as the focus of the work here. We've had much discussion about those in the past and more discussion is welcome.so long of course as it's in the spirit of "this is what Epicurus actually

taught" and not something that someone thinks he *should* have taught.

To some extent that includes the "fourth criteria" of the canon. That in itself is clearly stated by Diogenes Laertius to be something that later Epicureans added, and as Norman DeWitt argues, they added it because they did not understand the circularity that it creates by including in the canon something that is created by our own mental processing of the data from the senses, rather than from automatic functioning without opinion.

That too is something that sincere people disagree on, but as we can see in Torquatus there was already a tendency to water down after he was gone- in terms of the argument for friendship - what Epicurus had taught when he was alive.

I am sure we've had previous discussions on that and we can link to those and pursue them further, because clearly the present impressions of the mind are involved in Epicurean epistemology. But we're already on thin ice when embracing a formulation that Epicurus himself did not embrace.

I don't mean this post to sound harsh Matteng because I know you are sincere and I know you haven't been involved in our past discussions on these issues. Every so often it's going to be appropriate to air them all out again so people can know where everyone stands. This difference in approaches is why we have at least two separate websites devoted to the study of Epicurus in different ways, and in truth there are many more approaches, such as that at the Twentiers website and the website of the Athenian Garden in Greece.

We are all pursuing the study of Epicurus as we see best, and it's my strong opinion that we're all making better progress pursuing out individual threads than we would be if we were constantly "turned off" by the approach of people who are friends but who see things differently.

EDIT: I want to add that I have now seen the recent article by Hiram as to the Fourth Criterion, and he makes very clear in the article itself that there are many questions around the addition of the fourth. So to be clear his article seems to me to do a good job of pointing out the issues involved.

Post by "Cassius" of April 18, 2026 at 4:47 PM

Also while this topic is on my mind:

it's always important to be clear here as to exactly what we are talking about. When some hear "innovation" or "Updates" they are thinking about "let's talk about applying Epicurean ethics and ideas to modern situations.

And *of course* that's what we want to do.

That relates to another point:

We are running a discussion forum that caters to nonspecialists, and (to be honest) people who have a generally middle class Americans/ European worldview and are focused on wanting to live happier lives. We do have many people from whom English is not their first language, and we welcome anyone sincerely interested in Epicurus, but we are definitely not catering to a specialist/academic orientation that likes to pursue every rabbit as far down a trail as they can go. People on the forum see "latest posts" and if we get too far off into specifics that are not of general interest, then then adversely impacts the mission of the forum.

So that in itself is a very significant factor in theorizing about "innovations" in core ideas.

Post by "Cassius" of April 18, 2026 at 4:58 PM

Thanks to Joshua for his post which I did not previously see.

As to the "fourth criteria" we have this earlier thread which explains the DeWitt position. Again, I'm by no means saying it is ridiculous to talk about the present impressions of the mind. The issue is what rank to give it and how to consider it, and clearly Epicurus himself did not consider there to be four criteria - his were the sensations, anticipations and feelings. To talk of "four criteria" is to presumptively take a position on an issue that is not at all settled in that direction, and which in fact is not the way Epicurus himself spoke. This is the hazard I was referring to earlier. Someone new to Epicurus and reading about "four criteria" as if it were a given that that was Epicurus' approach is going to be immediately misled.

Thread

[Thoughts On The Alleged "Fourth Leg of the Canon"](#)

I don't have time for a long post but I wanted to start this topic with a couple of general thoughts which are prompted by our recent discussions of images in book four of Lucretius, plus the articles from [the Encyclopedia Britannica](#) (thanks Nate) as to the development of skepticism within the Academy, as well as the Stoic/Academic interplay involving how the Stoics attempted to remain dogmatic. Let me particularly highlight this paragraph:

[...]

Now as to the Epicureans, here is the primary...



Cassius

May 3, 2021 at 8:49 AM

Post by “Matteng” of April 19, 2026 at 2:51 AM

[Cassius](#) Yes, I agree.

My intention is not to change anything in the Philosophy. Indeed I think that the core principles are kind of eternal/timeless in this world.

My intention is more to see/ show that Epicurean Philosophy is not an old/dead/fixed one but it is valid in every time.

The details for example in the explanations of Epic. Physics changed but the core principles are still valid.

For example: Does the modern view of gravity and curved space-time invalid Epicurus view of an empty void ?

Some Epicureans would like to extend their view others may could say that maybe our space even consists of particles or strings as particles and so on...

But we still live in an material universe without divinity or afterlife....

„...Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is prudence. Wherefore prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy...”

Letter to Menoceus

For me Epicurean Philosophy is also (what often Stoics claim for them) „anti-fragile“

Where every new scientific discovery/ fact makes religion views „weaker“, Epicurean Philosophy becomes more „stronger“ or more convincing because of insisting on evidence and coherence within nature.

Post by “Cassius” of April 19, 2026 at 7:15 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Where every new scientific discovery/ fact makes religion views „weaker“, Epicurean Philosophy becomes more „stronger“ or more convincing because of insisting on evidence and coherence within nature.

Yes all of these discussions are of interest. The dividing line becomes one of appreciating that Epicurus was not ultimately taking positions on the latest developments in experimental theories then or now. It is very easy to confuse people with sweeping statements such as "We now know that there is 'energy' and other 'forces' which are not explicitly referenced in Epicurus' discussion of nature so his viewpoint is obsolete and irrelevant to ours."

Those kinds of statements show that the person making them has little to no appreciation of how Epicurus was actually approaching these issues. Even in his own time Epicurus was dealing with the ever-increasing accumulation of data. We will see that for example when we get to Philodemus' "On Signs." Everyone knew even then that there were parts of the world that they had not seen themselves, and that as a result they had to take a position on what 'knowledge' means to human beings, who always have limited data.

More directly as to physics, taking a position that infinite divisibility of matter is logically impossible, or that the universe as a whole is infinite in space or eternal in time, says nothing about the current state of what our scientists have found to date *as to the parts of matter, space, or time that they themselves have to that point examined*. Epicurus was talking about logical theory, and not the latest in the unending series of discoveries that is always going on.

Keeping those categories separate and clear is essential to having a practical understanding of the Epicurean approach.

Post by “Martin” of April 20, 2026 at 11:01 AM

Quote

infinite divisibility of matter is logically impossible

If Plato writes something like "finite divisibility of matter is logically impossible", we reject it because logic does not tell anything about reality, and logic is not in Epicurus' canon of truth. The statement "infinite divisibility of matter is logically impossible" is to be rejected for the same reason. That infinite divisibility of matter is possible is demonstrated by the success of

continuum theories, e.g. the classical theories of thermodynamics, electrodynamics and continuum mechanics. Experimentally determined coefficients make these theories work. Where continuum theories fail is at microscopic explanations and in microscopic systems. Atomism has much more explanatory power and can be used to calculate from small sets of fundamental constants the coefficients which are used in continuum theories.

Epicurus typical reasoning on basic physics applies the logic of indirect proof: It is inconceivable that [statement] is true. Therefore, the negation is true.

Meanwhile, the conceivability of some of what he thought was inconceivable has been established, so his indirect proof fails in these cases.

Atomism has won because of its far greater explanatory power for the phenomena, not because of logical impossibility of infinite divisibility of matter.

My approach regarding the innovations/updates in Epicurus' philosophy is to keep them mentally separate. Whereas I am fundamentally Epicurean (materialism, atomism, ethics, individualism, friendship), I am complementarily eclectic in aspects where Epicurus' philosophy has gaps and where some non-Epicurean philosophers and others have made progress beyond Epicurus' philosophy. I abandon obsolete details of Epicurus' physics and replace them with better alternatives. In this way, Epicurus' philosophy remains authentic and consistent as discussed on this forum, and it is up to each individual to decide which eclectic additions to make to one's personal philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of April 20, 2026 at 1:13 PM

In this case I follow Lucretius' argument in book one, (1-551) which is if I recall correctly is largely that if matter were infinitely divisible then the universe as a whole would have long since disappeared.

As I see it the fact that a particular theory "works in practice" does not mean that it does not work for some reason outside the theory. And in this case there has obviously been no one who has demonstrated in the real world that matter can be "infinitely" divided.

Post by “Pacatus” of April 22, 2026 at 1:14 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We are all pursuing the study of Epicurus as we see best, and it's my strong opinion that we're all making better progress pursuing out individual threads than we would be if we were constantly "turned off" by the approach of people who are friends but who see things differently.

This makes sense also for those of us who, as individuals, do explore different lines of thought re Epicurean philosophy, and even (as Martin notes) other schools of philosophy - where that seems helpful to us. For example, I often find stuff on Hiram's site helpful - though it represents viewpoints different from the project here.

But it is not helpful to spend our time on any one forum bickering about the differences, though it may be sometimes helpful to look at and acknowledge them - and then let it go. (I know that occasionally I have crossed the line, but I do try not to. 😞)

Post by "Adrastus" of May 7, 2026 at 11:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We are all pursuing the study of Epicurus as we see best, and it's my strong opinion that we're all making better progress pursuing out individual threads than we would be if we were constantly "turned off" by the approach of people who are friends but who see things differently.

I appreciate happening to catch this sentiment as I think it firmly extends the hand to folks like me who aren't scholarly or even particularly philosophical. I rarely read other philosophy, but I experience practices drawn from other frameworks, and working deeply with experiences of building community and interacting within community; and I always try to interpret these experiences through Epicurean lenses because EP is the only thing I actually know in greater detail and with greater play and fluctation within. I probably go too far with some of my stretching the meanings of words and a lot of that work is largely "soulful" in answering calls within my own soul to re arrange and fit these odd globs of clay into the extant many, but finite moulds of possible compounds haha... (there I go again.)

Maybe I am some self-styled Epicurean Mystic... wishing to experience things directly without completely being scholarly or sagely in deliberately reading other frameworks that are so foreign to Epicurean Philosophy. I appreciate this forum so much for not being too willing to move beyond the classical Epicurean texts. Anyway, I am off to go see and do. Peace and Safety.

Post by “Don” of May 8, 2026 at 3:56 AM

Thread

[PD24 - Commentary and Translation of PD 24](#)

Principal Doctrine 24 (PD 24) is one of the more convoluted doctrines with multiple phrases and conjunctions. I would like to provide some commentary and break the doctrine down into manageable words and phrases for everyone to get a more coherent understanding of what Epicurus was communicating. You may also want to take a look at [this doctrine’s page on the Epicurus Wiki](#):

First the original text:

[...]

Now, let’s break it down before we put it all back together. I’ll provide a (mostly) literal...



Don

September 2, 2020 at 11:56 PM

On the 4th leg, I wanted to bring up this extended thread we had awhile ago on [PD24](#). It goes a little off track at the end, but the first part is on point

(Full disclosure: I have not read Hiram's essay linked above yet.)

Post by “Don” of May 8, 2026 at 4:21 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

we still live in an material universe without divinity or afterlife....



Well said. THAT for me is the most basic fundamental doctrine in Epicurus' physics. That's the foundation stone upon which fear of the gods and anxiety of punishment after death are dispelled. THAT'S the non-negotiable point for me. Epicurus fleshes out that point, but that's what it gets built on and what it comes back to.

Scientists can argue the details of string theory, quantum loop gravity, quantum physics, and the rest. But [Matteng](#) concisely stated the foundation.