

Can You Suggest A Reading List For New Students of Epicurus?

Post by "Cassius" of December 9, 2018 at 11:46 AM

This thread is the place for discussion of the FAQ found [here](#).

[Can You Suggest A Reading List For New Students of Epicurus?](#)

Please consult the links and material on [this page](#), keeping in mind the following preliminary recommendation:

The ancient Epicurean texts that remain to us today are available freely on the internet in many different translations. There are many websites and articles available on the internet with many varying opinions as to the true teachings of Epicurus and many varying evaluations of the merit of those teachings. Unless you are already familiar with the major issues of Greek philosophy, it is very helpful to start the study of Epicurus with a sympathetic overview which attempts to present the full picture of Epicurean philosophy as an ancient Roman or Greek would have known it. That overview can be found in Norman DeWitt's [Epicurus And His Philosophy](#). Only when you have heard the Epicurean side presented fairly are you equipped to deal with the legions of critics of Epicurus, and only then can you develop your own fair verdict on Epicurus' conclusions. A taste of Professor DeWitt's approach and assessment of Epicurus can be found in his article "[Philosophy For The Millions](#)."

If you do not have immediate access to DeWitt's book, a second source that provides a very accessible picture of the sweep of Epicurean Philosophy is **Frances Wright's A Few Days In Athens**. [The full book is available here](#)

Wright's book is a fictional story about a young student in ancient Athens attempting to pick from several competing schools, and she does a great job of contrasting Epicurus with the alternatives, especially with stoicism. Wright's book is highly recommended, and like DeWitt does not lead the reader off into a rabbit chase after ataraxia / "absence of pain" as the goal of life.

So as an initial list in the order I would suggest a new student of Epicurus start, I would list:

1. "[Epicurus and His Philosophy](#)" by Norman DeWitt - If you are already "into" philosophy and want a sweeping textbook approach.
2. "[Living For Pleasure](#)" by Emily Austin - If you are new to philosophy and want a conversational, engaging, and easy-to-read approach.

3. "**A Few Days In Athens**" by Frances Wright - If you would prefer to read a fictional story written by a dynamic woman who was a friend of Thomas Jefferson and far ahead of her time.

[Recommended Reading](#) List (books and texts). We have found over the years that there are a number of key texts and references which most all serious students of Epicurus will want to read and evaluate for themselves. Those include the following:

- "[Epicurus and His Philosophy](#)" by Norman DeWitt
- [The Biography of Epicurus by Diogenes Laertius](#). This includes the surviving letters of Epicurus, including those to [Herodotus](#), [Pythocles](#), and [Menoceus](#).
- "[On The Nature of Things](#)" - by Lucretius (a poetic abridgement of Epicurus' "On Nature"
- "[Epicurus on Pleasure](#)" - By Boris [Nikolsky](#)
- The chapters on Epicurus in [Gosling and Taylor's "The Greeks On Pleasure."](#)
- [Cicero's "On Ends" - Torquatus Section](#)
- [Cicero's "On The Nature of the Gods" - Velleius Section](#)
- The Inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda - [Martin Ferguson Smith translation](#)
- [A Few Days In Athens" - Frances Wright](#)
- Lucian Core Texts on Epicurus: (1) [Alexander the Oracle-Monger](#), (2) [Hermodotimus Philodemus "On Methods of Inference"](#) (De Lacy version, including his appendix on relationship of Epicurean canon to Aristotle and other Greeks)

As a starting point, DeWitt's introduction in the opening chapter of his book can be read for free [here](#) or in article form [here](#).

Here is a "[library](#)" page with links to many primary sources available for free on the internet.

Post by "Cassius" of February 26, 2019 at 9:42 AM

My answer on 2/26/19 to someone asking "where to start reading?"

How much background in philosophy in general do you have? We can fine tune the suggestions much better if we know that. In the meantime I want to say that in my view the best book for a person new to philosophy to read is Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy." Don't pay an exorbitant price for it - any library has it, and you can buy digital versions for a reasonable price, and if you search hard enough you can find PDFs online.

Another excellent free online source is Frances Wright's "A Few Days In Athens," which is a fictional story that does an excellent job of introducing someone to Epicurus (that is in fact the theme of the story - introducing a new student to Epicurus). <https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3...D20frGAXNzYhgFP>

I don't have the time to develop this point as I would like to at this moment, but I want to stress that unless you are recently arrived from Mars, you are going to bring with your reading of Epicurus many preconceptions which need to be put aside in order to judge Epicurus fairly. The dominant philosophy of the world today is a mishmash of stoicism / platonism / aristotelianism / judaism / christianity which is virtually inescapable. You are conditioned to view all issues through that lens, and most people see what they expect to find when they are reading Epicurus.

The advantage of reading A Few Days In Athens or DeWitt's book is that both sources explain the background of the issues that were present in Epicurus' day, and how he answered them.

Unless you read a work like that, which explains the situation, it is very difficult to get a balanced picture by going straight to the letters of Epicurus, or even to Lucretius, which is a much longer and therefore more thorough presentation.

An excellent test for whether you are getting a balanced perspective is the treatment given by a writer of Epicurus' views on pleasure. If you come away with the idea that the writer is telling you that pleasure is nothing more than the absence of pain, and that the best life is therefore gained by suppressing pain in any way possible, and that the simplest life is always the best, then you should look elsewhere (to DeWitt or Wright) for a more balanced perspective.

Another excellent test is to look for how many references a writer makes to "pleasure" in discussing Epicurus. You will find that writers who are ultimately some version of Stoic will de-emphasize the word pleasure, and talk mostly about "happiness" or "ataraxia" or even "flourishing" -- and these writers too are perverting Epicurus to fit their own perspective of the best life.

There are many good books that have many excellent points about Epicurus, and I specifically include Hiram's book and Haris' book (both members here) as good for practical application of the full theory. But neither of these attempt to provide the full sweep of the theory in a manner that an ancient Epicurean would probably approve, and you won't get in English anywhere but DeWitt, and to a lesser extent from Wright.

Post by "Hiram" of February 26, 2019 at 10:27 AM

Here's a book review for [TteG](#):

<https://thehumanist.com/magazine/janua...picurean-garden>

and here's a Spanish language curriculum

<https://sociedadepicuro.wordpress.com/2017/03/20/iti...dios-epicureos/>

Post by “Hiram” of February 26, 2019 at 10:28 AM

also ElementalEpicureanism.com

Post by “Cassius” of September 3, 2019 at 8:10 PM

What are the best three resources for a beginning student to read?

1 - Norman DeWitt "Epicurus and His Philosophy" which will give you the necessary overall context of what you are about to read in the next two sources.

2 - [Diogenes Laertius' Biography of Epicurus](#) which will give you the primary source material from which everyone works.

3 - Lucretius "On The Nature of Things" in a *narrative* translation which will give you a trustworthy example of the thought process of an ancient Epicurean and how it starts with physics about the nature of the universe, the nature of the human soul, and the primary role of sensation over "logic." The current authoritative version is by Martin Ferguson Smith by Hackett publishing, but there are free public domain ones at this link - https://epicureanfriends.com/wiki/doku.php?...ature_of_things

Only after you've got a good grounding in the overall philosophy will you be in a position to understand why the modern summary "Epicurus was a strange hedonist because he defined pleasure as the absence of pain" is so ridiculously inaccurate and demeaning to the man and his legacy to humanity.

If you asked me for a fourth, I would say Cicero's "On Ends" which gives from the pen of someone who knew them intimately more of the big picture of the logical arguments from

opposing schools with which the ancient Epicureans were dealing.

Post by "Joshua" of September 3, 2019 at 9:03 PM

For the "beginning student" those are excellent choices. For a curious but less committed person, I might start them on Frances Wright. If they bite, they'll be well-primed for the real stuff. If not, they can console themselves with having enjoyed a pleasant novel meanwhile.

DeWitt we must always regard as essential. I sometimes wonder if he has family alive who knew him, and whether they know how grateful many of us are for his work.

Post by "Cassius" of September 3, 2019 at 9:44 PM

Excellent comment about Frances Wright -- you are correct!

I have tried to contact them and I know that he has a grandson, who was very nice by email. I asked him if there were surviving family papers and he indicated that there were not - anything that is left is at the University of Toronto.

Post by "Joshua" of September 3, 2019 at 10:02 PM

Quote

I have tried to contact them and I know that he has a grandson, who was very nice by email. I asked him if there were surviving family papers and he indicated that there were not - anything that is left is at the University of Toronto.

Oh, that's awesome, Cassius! So much gets "lost in the aether" these days. One of the things I don't like about the nomad life is the impossibility of a physical archive. Just earlier today I was searching for an article I once read that was critical of Lucian's essay on Alexander; the writer had suggested that if Lucian had lived long enough to read the gospels he would have burned

his anti-supernatural works in shame. I was keen to post it with a rebuttal, but alas! Not to be found.

Post by “Cassius” of September 3, 2019 at 10:12 PM

Yes it is a huge problem, and I think about the same thing not only in my finding the material I have accumulated, but I would like to see some of our work preserved to be of benefit to others for a long time. The technology age is both blessing and curse but we have to work to turn it into the tool that sparks the flame of a new Epicurean revival 😊

As for the DeWitt family, I think some of this I discussed earlier with Oscar, who is a student at the University of Toronto. As you're probably aware DeWitt was a professor there, then his son was a professor at the University of Illinois. The grandson told me that unfortunately as first his grandfather and then his father died, papers were discarded as part of the normal process of clearing estates.

The one thing that was able to retrieve from the grandson was this picture of Norman DeWitt on a farm machine!



These additional pictures of Professor DeWitt I found myself, years ago, by googling:

<https://newepicurean.com/ behold-the-fac...ntworth-dewitt/>

I find this one humorous and with the kind of look I could almost imagine Epicurus showing, when surrounded by his students:



Post by “Joshua” of September 3, 2019 at 10:46 PM

This is great stuff! I love that farm picture with the straw boater hat! Thanks again