

Happy Epicurean New Year

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Let me add my own "Happy New Year" greeting to everyone here. As I enter my sixth year of focused attention to studying the philosophy of Epicurus, there are a couple of points I would offer to those who are new here:

1. Early on, think carefully about the issue of "what is the goal of life?" That should be an obvious place to start, but people tend to develop strong convictions about this subconsciously, long before they arrive in our group. Rather than study Epicurus afresh, they presume that the answer is obvious, and that Epicurus simply offers a new path to a destination which is already familiar. Do you think the goal of life is "happiness", or "being a good person," or "serving others," or "helping humanity in general," or "living in accord with Nature?" No matter how educated and enlightened you may consider yourself to be, you'll still be faced with the issue of juggling the priority to give to each one. What happens when "happiness" and "courage" or "wisdom" or "altruism" seem to come into conflict? How do you choose between them? Many of our new readers are familiar with the answers given by Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle, and many others come to us through Stoicism. Don't waste your time studying too much Epicurus until you understand how, and why, Epicurus gave a much different answer to the "goal of life" question than did these other philosophies. Many of you will find yourself so loyal to your preexisting view of the goal of life that you'll not be able to accept Epicurus' conclusions. No one likes to waste time (least of all those who have already made up their mind on this question) so visit that issue quickly.

2. Related to point one is the issue of the role of "reason" and "logic" in Epicurean philosophy. If Mr. Spock has been your hero since childhood and you cannot imagine that "reason" is not the most fundamental key to Epicurean philosophy, then you are going to be in for a rude awakening as you study the Epicurean "canon of truth." Although Spock was never my hero, I personally came from such a background where "reason" was held to be "the highest virtue," and this was among the biggest adjustments I had to make in the study of Epicurus. I made it through the transition myself, but many people don't.

3. Consider carefully the question of the meaning of the words "happiness" and "pleasure." Epicurus places "pleasure" at the center of his philosophy, but this does not mean that he considered "wine, women, and song" as the goal of life. The role of "reason" in life must be

answered in relation to the role of the "senses." Epicurus held that any valid reasoning must be based on confirming sensations, and pleasure is the only sensation (faculty) given us by nature to judge what is truly desirable in life. "Reason" will never in a million years tell you why it is pleasing to look on the face of a friend that you love. This is a controversial orientation, so be prepared to learn that just about every aspect of Epicurean literature devoted to some aspect of the relationship of **pleasure** as the guide of life.

4. Don't gloss over the discussion of "atoms and void" as unimportant, and don't dismiss the discussion as obsolete science. Remember that a key insight of Epicurus is that "truth" does not come to us from the gods, or from abstract reasoning alone. The information we glean about the world around us does not come to us in mystical fashion. Instead, information comes to us in the form of flows of particles that travel from the objects around us and strike our senses. It is the job of our senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling to take those flows of particles and report to us what they receive. Here's the rub: thousands of years of commentators, followed by your high school philosophy teacher, have taught you that Epicurus held that ["all sensations are true."](#) Opponents of Epicurus think it's a slick trick to discourage his students by alleging that Epicurus held that whenever you think you see a rabbit (for instance) that means that a rabbit really is there. Epicurus held nothing of the sort, and if you'll refer to Lucretius you'll see extensive texts devoted to explaining not just the nature of the universe but also the nature of the illusions that result when we misjudge what our eyes tell us. For a philosophy that rejects divine revelation and abstract speculation as sufficient for deciding the most important questions in life, providing an understanding of the senses and our ability to trust them is obviously crucial. So keep in mind that atoms and void and "images" and the like are key to the understanding many of the most important questions of life, not just useless scientific speculation.

5. Last and maybe most importantly for this New Year's list, don't get discouraged by thinking that Epicurean philosophy offers you an infallible guide to successful living. Many who come to Epicurus from the religious or the pseudo-mystical philosophies - including the nonsense of Platonic "ideal forms" or Stoic "Divine Fire" or the "essences" of Aristotle - are expecting a "magic bullet" that will magically redeem the world from being a place where pain and death abound. Epicurus dealt with reality, and not fantasy, and he did not try to convince his students that they could erase the pain of life by telling themselves that pain does not exist, or that pain can be suppressed by willpower alone, or that men should shun emotion and withdraw into caves of isolation and introspection. No matter what your prior religious or philosophic background, you probably have been told that there is some kind of divine logic in the universe that will lead you to a state of mystical bliss - of which a moment spent in that bliss is worth a lifetime of study. Horsefeathers. You will not find in Epicurus a guarantee that all pain can be avoided, and you will not find a dispenser of divine "justice" who will ease the pain of those whose lives are truly "nasty, brutish, and short." But what Epicurus does offer is a system of understanding the universe and our role in it that - if employed correctly - gives us the best possible opportunity that we and our friends will be successful in maximizing the happiness of our lives.

So at the end of my fifth year of studying Epicurus, I am more confident than ever that Epicurean philosophy is something truly special that we would all profit from applying, and that it assists us all in happy living if we take the true message of Epicurus to the attention of all people of good faith and open mind who are willing to listen.