

What Makes Someone "An Epicurean?"

Post by "Cassius" of March 30, 2019 at 7:49 PM

In a nearby thread the question was raised about who should be considered to be an Epicurean. No one has the authority to give such a list, and probably no one after Epicurus himself, or the last head of the Epicurean school in Athens in the ancient world, ever had that authority. But we ought to give thought to what the key components of the philosophy are, so we can consider how many of them fit the person we're considering labeling as an Epicurean.

My own first question is "Does the person call himself an Epicurean?" Epicurean philosophers have always acknowledged a debt to the person of Epicurus himself as the founder of the school. So if the person doesn't explicitly talk about Epicurus, that is probably a bright line that would eliminate that person from being considered to be a part of the Epicurean school, no matter how many admirable personality traits or interests we can identify in them.

But today, in another context I was asked for my view of the most important points of Epicurean philosophy, and I came up with the list in the graphic below. The way I formulate these points regularly changes, but I think most versions of this list tend to revolve around similar core points that we can find in the [Principal Doctrines](#), Epicurus' letters, and Lucretius. So I *personally* think, and I think that the majority of ancient Epicureans would think, that an Epicurean would agree with most and very probably all of the following points on this graphic.

Epicurean Philosophy Is A Foundation On Which A Person Sees:

- (1) that supernatural religion is not only false but a lie;
- (2) that there is no punishment, reward, or life of any kind after death;
- (3) that one's life is all one has and is very important, meaning that nihilism is an abomination;
- (4) that there are no absolute standards of right and wrong that apply to all people at all times,
- (5) that rather than absolute standards, Nature has provided us with the faculty of feeling - pleasure and pain - as the guide by which we should base our decisions on how to live,
- (6) that "reason" and "logic" and "virtue" are dependent on the natural faculties, and have no value in themselves apart from those faculties; and
- (7) that it is proper to be confident that the Epicurean positions on these issues is correct, and
- (8) that through Epicurean philosophy that we can overcome the priests and false philosophers who try to keep the gates of knowledge tightly barred.



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Post by “Kalosyni” of November 7, 2023 at 9:07 AM

Last night at our Zoom meeting I brought up the discussion question of "What makes someone an Epicurean?" and also followed that with "Would you consider yourself an Epicurean?" ...and we had lots of interesting thoughts shared on these two questions.

Here are a few of the points (of what I can remember) which came up regarding whether someone considers themselves to be an Epicurean:

- a person adopts that label for themselves
- the study and implementation of the philosophy of Epicurus
- feeling agreement with all [or most] of the philosophy of Epicurus
- regular attendance at 20th meetings
- belief in specific things, such as a materialist view of the universe (Cassius has a good list in the preceding post in this thread).

There isn't a strict line that would prohibit one to consider themselves as such. Epicurus isn't alive to say who is and isn't an Epicurean.

Occasionally we notice that there are some people who "are Epicurean" without knowing about Epicurus. So that brings up the idea regarding the importance of a philosophical lineage, and the following point by Cassius:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

My own first question is "Does the person call himself an Epicurean?" Epicurean philosophers have always acknowledged a debt to the person of Epicurus himself as the founder of the school. So if the person doesn't explicitly talk about Epicurus, that is probably a bright line that would eliminate that person from being considered to be a part of the Epicurean school, no matter how many admirable personality traits or interests we can identify in them.

[Joshua](#), [Godfrey](#), [kochiekoch](#), [Onenski](#), [TauPhi](#), [Lowri834](#) -- if I missed any good points, please add them to this thread, thanks.

And also, everyone else is welcome to weigh in on this topic as well 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 7, 2023 at 9:26 AM

Also, during the meeting I mentioned how the wearing of Epicurus rings might have been a way to identify oneself with the Epicurean philosophy. [Joshua](#), toward the end of the meeting you found something regarding cups and rings which you read to us...can you post a link for that?

Post by “Joshua” of November 7, 2023 at 12:00 PM

[Cicero, De Finibus, Book V, Section 3](#)

Or just control+F search for "rings"

Post by “Pacatus” of November 7, 2023 at 1:11 PM

It is probably best to consider me no more than a philosophical fellow-traveler for the time – a guest in the Garden so long as I am welcome, as long as I might be contributing rather than causing conflict or tearing down. I finally gave up the notion – or the perceived need – for some permanent (or even formal, let alone creedal) membership for myself in any group. The desire to belong was once a large shaping force in my life – it just isn't anymore. (It's likely natural, but I don't find it necessary; and likely most people find it more helpful than I have.)

So I will not call myself “an Epicurean” – nor certainly something like a true or proper Epicurean. I generally try to be careful with my language in such things: “I think about myself and life now more in Epicurean terms, and try to make better decisions in my daily life accordingly” – or the like.

None of that is to say that I don't find pleasure in the friendship here. If I didn't, I wouldn't walk along. None of that is to suggest that there is something wrong about seeking membership, or defining the terms of the same. Or forming a school of thought that does outreach. Not in any way. But I can only ever think of myself as “a fellow-traveler for the time”.

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With regard to Epicurus merchandise, I do have one of these pendants that were put out by Hiram Crespo's group (I'm not sure they are available anymore, but you can probably find out). I wear it as a reminder for myself (most often under my shirt), not for identification. (It hangs near my heart, which seems like a good place to touch it as that reminder.)

https://www.etsy.com/listing/917548910/epicurus-votive-charm-necklace-with?show_sold_out_detail=1&ref=nl_listing_details



Post by “Don” of November 7, 2023 at 1:18 PM

Does my keychain I made count? 😊

Post

RE: Participants' Epicurean Book and Artifact Collections

I've posted this before but figured this was appropriate here, too. These are my two Epicurean keychains: 1 with 4 wooden beads for the Tetracharmakos; one with SFOTSE (Sic fac omnia tamquam spectet Epicurus "Do all things as if Epicurus were watching") with three beads for both physics, canon, and ethics or sensations, pathē, and prolepsis (take your pick 😊)

985_img-20200304-213138-copy-478x849-jpg



Don

January 17, 2022 at 10:06 PM

Post by "Kalosyni" of November 8, 2023 at 8:29 AM

Another thing to consider, since in modern times we have a much more complete understanding of the natural world and phenomenon, as compared to the ancient world, is that our current scientific understanding surpasses what ancient Epicureans believed. Yet, the ethics aspects of how to live a happy life still applies. So I don't have to believe all (regarding the nuances of natural physics) of what Epicurus taught to still see myself as "being an Epicurean", because I still see myself as understanding the world as being natural not supernatural, and also that pleasure is a guide of life.

Post by "Kalosyni" of May 16, 2025 at 9:30 AM

I'm pondering this question today (again)...of which there are two sides...1) "what would make me Epicurean" and 2) "what would make someone else Epicurean" or to "appear to be Epicurean" (such as people we know or characters in a movie).

And I want **to focus on the the second one**, which is somewhat of a projection of "what "qualifies"(lol, hypothetically) someone as being Epicurean" or even better to say is as: "**what**

qualities and actions would an Epicurean" exhibit, such as we could then say "that person is Epicurean".

And here are a few thoughts on this off the top of my head:

-- an Epicurean knows how to exercise their thinking process to make good choices that result in good outcomes, for their personal happiness and well-being (physical and mental well-being), both in the short-term and in the long-term. (Letter to Menoeceus and [Principal Doctrines](#)).

-- an Epicurean lives neither as a secluded ascetic, nor as sleepy sluggard or addict, nor as a wild bohemian party animal, nor as a work-aholic -- but instead finds a pleasing and pleasant sense of a well functioning life. (Vatican Saying 11: "For most people, to be quiet is to be numb and to be active is to be frenzied.")

-- an Epicurean spends time studying or contemplating the nature of things as the material (what is, its nature, its causes, its beginnings and endings) rather than the ideal/forms. (Letter to Menoeceus and Lucretius).

Thoughts? Anything else?

Post by "Cassius" of May 16, 2025 at 9:42 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

lives neither as a secluded ascetic, nor as sleepy sluggard or addict, nor as a wild bohemian party animal, nor as a work-aholic -- but instead finds a pleasing and pleasant sense of a well functioning life.

All of which are theoretically perfectly acceptable lifestyles, and in fact in some instances may be a rational choice, but which we also recognize as generally leading to unhappy / unpleasant results including sickness, disease, isolation, and earlier-than-otherwise death, for which reason it is generally good advice to avoid them.

Quote

[PD10](#). If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2025 at 3:59 PM

One thing to watch out for in conversations like this is not to fall into the "no true Scotsman" fallacy.

[No true Scotsman - Wikipedia](#)

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 16, 2025 at 7:31 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

One thing to watch out for in conversations like this is not to fall into the "no true Scotsman" fallacy.

For a movie character or a fictional literary character, we could still apply an absolute when we are using it to point to something -- using it as a model.

But for an actual human being, we can't expect someone to always do things a certain way, so more correctly would say "usually", "most of the time" -- acts in a certain way.

Post by “Onenski” of May 16, 2025 at 9:16 PM

Hi, I think [Don](#) has brought up a very important point. I'll try to explain why.

Dear [Kalosyni](#), I believe we can distinguish at least two types of descriptions of an 'Epicurean person'. **On one hand**, we can attempt to give a description of what an ideal Epicurean would be like—that is, a description of the Epicurean sage. This was more or less already done by Diogenes Laertius in Book X. We could also try to give our own description with slightly more modernized traits or attempt to reconstruct it from the texts we have available (as I'm sure [Cassius](#) would agree to do). This would be the 'true Scotsman' description in the fallacy Don mentioned. This description has a **prescriptive function**—it guides us toward what we *should* do to live more happily.

On the other hand, we have the description of people who **try** to be Epicurean. This description is much looser than the previous one because it doesn't aim to say how we *ought* to be, but rather how we actually *are* (or at least those of us who strive to live more Epicurean lives). Here, you'll find a wide range of people, some of whom you might filter out.

For example, there are people who consider themselves Epicurean simply because they enjoy eating delicious, even luxurious, food. You might filter out those descriptions if you think they're missing something essential to being truly Epicurean (like knowing at least who Epicurus was).

Here, it's worth mentioning something I myself have said in my own interpretation of Epicurus (and which perhaps has been somewhat inappropriate, or careless). I've said before that we are *all* Epicureans (meaning that we are all psychological hedonists), and the only thing we lack to be happy is recognizing it and acting in accordance with a calculus of pleasure and pain. It's possible that Epicurus also thought that we all act in pursuit of pleasure (i.e., hedonistically), and if we acknowledged this, we'd avoid many mistakes and sufferings by directly seeking what brings us the most long-term pleasure.

What I mean is that we can even give a loose description under which we are all, in some way, Epicureans and, likewise, we can give descriptions that require greater commitment to be considered Epicurean. The important point of this kind of description is that it simply tells how people are.

From this simple distinction, follows that if you want to define a group of people committed to this philosophy to some degree, then the second type of description would be appropriate. If, instead, you'd like to use the description to guide your actions, then the first type would be preferable.

Based on what you write in your post, it seems to me that you want to establish certain criteria to define a group of epicurean people. I suggest some to you, ranging from the loosest to the strictest:

1. "We are all Epicureans, insofar as we act in pursuit of pleasure."
2. "Those who *say* they are Epicureans, in fact, *are*, because by applying the label to themselves, they suggest they know what they're talking about, and we can take them at their word."
3. "Those who have read (at least) Epicurus and agree with his ideas but aren't very interested in putting them into practice."
4. "Those who have read (at least) Epicurus, agree with his ideas, and *want* to put them into practice—even if they don't fully succeed."
5. "Those who have read (at least) Epicurus, agree with his ideas, *want* to put them into practice, and *actually* succeed in doing so."

For the last three criteria, I leave open how much they've read and how they've interpreted it. We already know there are more ascetic readings and less ascetic ones. We could also

establish criteria regarding the *type* of reading.

As you can see, the choice of criteria isn't something set in stone—it's perhaps somewhat arbitrary. In any case, one can argue in favor of any of them, with greater or lesser success.

I hope I haven't just stated the obvious and that this distinction is somewhat useful. Likewise, I hope you're all doing well—I haven't been able to meet up with you, but I hope to do so soon.



Post by “Don” of May 17, 2025 at 2:34 AM

[Onenski](#) has articulated much more eloquently than I could the thoughts that have been rolling around in my mind on this topic. Thank you!

The question comes down to "Who gets to be the gatekeeper?" and "Who defines the in-group and who gets to exclude the out-group?" That's what I like about [Onenski](#) 's five categories. They show the spectrum of potential inclusivity and exclusivity. Granted, *I* can say who *I* think should be "allowed" to carry the label of "Epicurean," but I cannot assert any authoritative mandate on the "proper" use of that "title."

We could maybe/probably assess someone's (or some character's) behavior as more or less prudent, more or less likely to lead to a pleasurable outcome. Even Epicurus, I would argue, did that! But do we get to assess whether someone gets to call themselves an "Epicurean"? Of that, I'm a little more skeptical. Honestly, I have a hard time "accepting" that Thomas Jefferson was a "real" Epicurean even though he was a self-professed one. But then I would appear to be falling into that fallacy I brought up, wouldn't I?

Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2025 at 5:44 AM

1 - It's good to hear from Onenski!

2 - I agree with most everything Don and Onenski have written.

3 - I want to emphasize the underlined part of the wikipedia entry:

Quote

No true Scotsman or **appeal to purity** is an [informal fallacy](#) in which one modifies a prior claim in response to a [counterexample](#) by asserting the counterexample is excluded by definition. Rather than admitting error or providing evidence to disprove the counterexample, the original claim is changed by using a non-substantive modifier such as "true", "pure", "genuine", "authentic", "real", or other similar terms.

As I see it, it's important to see that the "no true Scotsman fallacy" does not mean that the thrust of the position being taken is not statistically true. All this "fallacy" is saying is that if you want to be precise about your assertion, you should explain and be prepared to prove - more than just asserting it to be true - why the counterexample being thrown in your face is an exception to the generalization.

Just because your uncle Angus puts sugar on his porridge does not prove that as a cultural generalization, 99% of Scotsmen do not put sugar on their porridge. The only thing that the "fallacy" says is that if someone can point to an exception, then the "rule" is not true 100% of the time, and so if one wants to be precisely accurate, what needs to say is "the great majority of Scotsmen do not put sugar on their porridge."

BOTH can be true at the same time: (1) your uncle DOES put sugar on his porridge, and (2) 99% of Scotsmen do not. There is no conflict between those two positions, but to say "No true Scotsman" or "No Scotsman" puts sugar on his porridge is overbroad.

Some cases call for precision more than do others, and asserting the Scotsman fallacy can sometimes be ridiculous itself when everyone knows that the person is stating a generalization rather than really meaning that there are no exceptions. However it's always good to be precise when issues are complex, such as when Onenski wrote:

[Quote from Onenski](#)

It's possible that Epicurus also thought that we all act in pursuit of pleasure (i.e., hedonistically), and if we acknowledged this, we'd avoid many mistakes and sufferings by directly seeking what brings us the most long-term pleasure.

I commonly say that myself, and I think it's sometimes or even often true. But I think it's important to remember that in the letter to Menoecus Epicurus said specifically that time is not only or overriding factor, thus "long-term" is not quite right. It's "the greatest pleasure" which might or might not necessarily be the "long-term" choice.



[126] ... And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant.

So precision is generally a good idea. *No true Epicurean would want to be less than clear!*

Post by “Don” of May 17, 2025 at 7:50 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So precision is generally a good idea. No true Epicurean would want to be less than clear!

 Well played! I see what you did there. 

Post by “Don” of May 17, 2025 at 10:12 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I'm pondering this question today (again)...of which there are two sides...1) "what would make me Epicurean" and 2) "what would make someone else Epicurean" or to "appear to be Epicurean" (such as people we know or characters in a movie).

Revisiting [Kalosyni](#) 's post that revitalized this thread.

My perspective is that both 1 and 2 hinge on motivation. We can't know someone else's (2) motivation. They can tell us, but we can't know what's *really* in their minds. That's why, I feel, we can assess *behavior* in others but not their *motivation*. Someone can say "I party because I'm an *Epicurean*, man!" We can ask "How did you feel the next day?" But we can't police (simply for lack of a better word) who calls themselves an Epicurean... Any more than Christians can't police who calls themselves a Christian.

Now, for (1), that's another thing. If I call myself an epicurean simply because I like to eat fancy food, and drink fine wine, that's one thing and a very surface stereotype understanding of what that word means (hence my not capitalizing the word). But we can't forbid that usage. If, on the other hand, we decide - are motivated - to lean about this philosophy and to apply it to living our lives, we think of ourselves as Epicureans. Someone who lives a minimalist lifestyle may also honestly call themselves an Epicurean from another popular understanding of the actual philosophy. We here would tend to disagree with them, but can we - should we - try to make them stop? I'd say no. None of us have that authority. There is no "apostolic succession" from Epicurus to our time. And there could be denominations if there even were! The most we can do is try to get a deeper understanding of the philosophy out there and encourage sincere students of Epicurus.

Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2025 at 11:22 AM

I liked the last post, and I think the final sentence is correct as of the moment - that's what we're doing at this forum.

[Quote from Don](#)

The most we can do is try to get a deeper understanding of the philosophy out there and encourage sincere students of Epicurus.

But I would hope and expect that to change in the future. All roads point back to Epicurus as the best of the ancient philosophers, and it is only natural and identified by Epicurus that living our happiest lives requires us to find and live among friends of Epicurean outlook.

I would expect as people get more motivated to take action in various ways of life, more people will see that emulating the formation of multiple centers of Epicurean cooperation will happen too. So I write just to emphasize that the "all we can" is limited to "under the present state of affairs," and that "present state of affairs" will almost certainly change. And hopefully multiple people reading these discussions will help change that!

Post by “Don” of May 17, 2025 at 11:44 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So I write just to emphasize that the "all we can" is limited to "under the present state of affairs," and that "present state of affairs" will almost certainly change.

Although, the more Epicureans; the more likelihood of schisms and denominations. Three vs four legs is just the tip of the iceberg.

Post by “Cassius” of May 17, 2025 at 7:56 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Although, the more Epicureans; the more likelihood of schisms and denominations.
Three vs four legs is just the tip of the iceberg.

Very possibly true, but there is also "strength in numbers" 😊

And I doubt any of us here already have to worry too much. Most of us are probably natural born contrarians anyway so we'll always find reasons for schism no matter how few or many of us there are 😊

Post by “Patrikios” of May 18, 2025 at 4:09 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I'm pondering this question today (again)...of which there are two sides...1) "what would make me Epicurean"

[Kalosyni](#) , thank you for this simple question.

First, I don't think of being an “Epicurean” as a noun, a label. Rather, I see being a Friend of Epicurus as a life-long process of learning, applying, and re-learning the basic principles taught by Epicurus. I have learned to reject the use of labels to categorize myself (or others), as I could never live up to the expectations of others who applied specific criteria to their label more vigorously.

For me, the key qualities that outline my Epicurean journey include:

- Pursuing rational pleasure while avoiding excess
- Valuing friendship and community
- Embracing natural explanations over supernatural ones
- Seeking tranquility (ataraxia) as a highest good
- Practicing practical wisdom (phronesis) in daily life

Through the help of contributors on this website, I gain a better understanding of how to implement an Epicurean philosophical practice that leads to a life of wellbeing (eudaimonia). ☐

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 19, 2025 at 1:06 PM

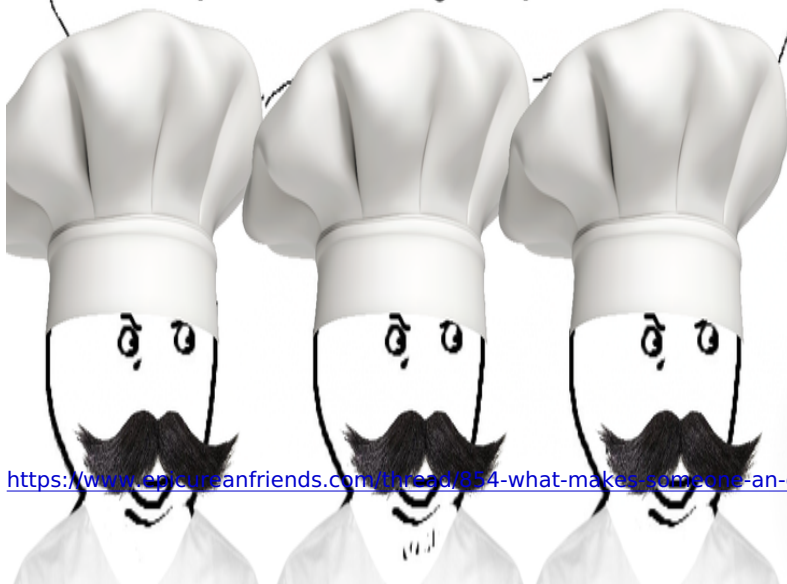
Τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἀφθαρτον οὔτε αὐτὸ πράγματα ἔχει οὔτε ἄλλω παρέχει· ὥστε οὔτε ὀργαῖς οὔτε χάρισι συνέχεται·



Who the **** are you people?
I thought I hired epicureans?



Bonjour, cuisinier. Quelle canette de musique aimez-vous et quelle est votre drogue de prédilection?



Ποιος στο **** είστε; Νόμιζα ὅτι προσέλαβα **Επικούρειους**;



